Monster Girl Saga Vol4

Monster Girl Saga - IV

Anonemoose

Chapter 48

Under the cold light of day, a single horse drawn carriage rocked back forth along a rough mountain path. It clattered and clicked on the winding dirt path toward its final destination; a lone castle beneath perpetually grey skies. Only the sea of green from the pines which the road was hidden within reminded travelers that they had not left the land of the living. It was a vital reminder, because this place nestled on the western fringes of the Empire since time immemorial has shared a boarder with the Shadelands.

Those lands are steeped in perpetual darkness. A place where the eerie glow of a full moon is the only source of light whether it was day or night. In ancient times, a wall had been built to guard against those that doweled within because the only thing that wandered out from that cursed realm (or returned) are the undead. What once lived there or what cursed those lands was knowledge that had long been lost, but the Duchy of Yaleria was populated with hearty and somber people, just like the land they inhabited. Thick impenetrable forests and little sunlight meant that these people had only the tubers and fresh water fish to sustain themselves. Although the land had been cursed, it was also blessed with rich veins of silver deep beneath the pine covered hills.

Within the carriage were two people who sat opposite of each other: a young man with a bald head, sunken brown eyes and adorned with luxurious fabrics befitting of a noble and the other garbed in black robes that made their owner's identity a mystery. Polite conversation had ended long ago and the two had sat and been rocked relentlessly back and forth for many hours without so much as a word. The eerie grey light from the sky, the murders of crows and the silence had put the one man on edge. Occasionally he rubbed off droplets of sweat that had started to pool on his forehead even though the spring air was chilly and sun robbed.

The man was a count of Yaleria, but reigned over lands in the far east of the Duchy. He seldom traveled so far west, toward where the Duke had made his home. A castle precariously close to Brightwall, the boarder between Yaleria and the Shadelands. Duke Malco was a serious and honorable man, so the rumors went. For generations, the Malco family had been tasked with guarding Brightwall. There is no shortage of legends about armies of the undead laying siege to it and Malcos putting their own life on the line to ensure that wall remained standing. It would stand or his family line would end. No Malco would suffer the shame of living with such failure and the Empire might soon follow if the undead spread and swelled their ranks with the living that lay beyond that wall which had bottled them

up for over a millennium.

The carriage clattered at last beyond the outer walls and through the main gate of Brightcastle. Guards standing watch at the gate seemed to have been expecting the arrival of the official looking carriage and let it pass without incident. The count thought it was odd, but the cloaked man and their driver paid it no mind and remained silent. When the carriage followed the cobbled path toward the main entrance to the castle, the count stole a glance at the cloaked figure and received a nod in return. His throat was parched, but he stepped out into the cold air where another pair of guards met him. They were thickly armored head to toe, their faces masked with helmet visors and they motioned for the count to follow them as they lead him into the castle. He stole one more glance at the carriage that was now motionless and awaiting his return before entering the castle.

Sound itself seemed just as still and lifeless as the air, only the sound of leather boots from the count's own feet seemed to carry any sound. It was an eerie feeling, especially with the two metal laden guards escorting him were barely making any noise at all. The lifeless air was contrasted with the rich and vibrant reds, purples and other dyes and paints that decorated the interior of the castle. They put the count's heart at ease and admiration at the value of them all alone caused the man to salivate. It showed how the rich silver mines of Yaleria had poured into this castle for hundreds of years.

At last the count was shown to the last pair of sealed oaken doors. The two guards took their posts at each side and when they did the doors swing open as though by themselves. Beyond it the grey light of day shone in through what was without a doubt the Duke's chambers. A luxurious open room with a balcony that hung far off the castle and above a cliff. Below was an endless expanse of forest, beyond that the impassible mountains and the one gap between them where even from so far away the Brightwall was visible. The uncanny black twilight was visible to the west like the red glow of dawn anywhere else. Simply bearing witness to it sent shivers up the count's spine.

"Count Aaron. Please, come in." Said a gentle yet manly voice which drifted in from the chamber.

He recognized the voice immediately, it belonged to Duke Malco. The count was not mistaken, seated perfectly still within the room was a man with thick, long and savage looking black hair that looked more like mane, a handsome clean shaven face and piercing hazel eyes. Those eyes were locked squarely on a chessboard in front of him. He hadn't even looked up from it to acknowledge the count. Even if the count was insulted he would not have the courage to say a thing, the Duke broad muscular shoulders draped in wolf pelts

betrayed the martial prowess of the Duke who braved perhaps one of the most dangerous places on the continent out of a stern sense of duty. Count Aaron decided to enter and take the seat as though he was commanded, not asked politely to.

"Count Aaron, I will get straight to the point. There is a disaster coming."

The count wasn't expecting any good news, but hearing straight from the Duke like that had the sweat on his brow double.

"My liege? What would lead you to think that?" Aaron stuttered. "You don't mean-!"

"Not the Brightwall." The duke said flatly. "Something worse. I'm afraid the Empire will soon have to endure its most trying times in a thousand years."

The count actually let out a sigh of relief, "My liege. I must be so bold to say I expected more of you. Surely you understand the talk from the doomsayers is just rumor mongering."

"Regretfully that is not the case, Count Aaron." The duke replied, his eyes still on the chessboard. "The north is all but lost. The pagan faction of the Vilmheim court has seized all but full control and Domdracveria has a monster on the throne. It won't be long until the other lands of pagan majority in the north fall in line behind those two."

The count calmly refuted with a pompous air about him, "A few backwaters are nothing compared to that of the Empire, surely you must-"

"You would ignore that the Emperor is infirm?"

The count's eyes shot widen open and he went rigid in his chair as though a lightning bolt had shot through him.

"Oh?" Duke Malco quipped, raising and eyebrow and finally looking up from the chessboard. "So you didn't know? I would have figured you of all people would have caught wind of it."

"T-the Emperor is not a young man anymore, my liege. It is regrettable, b-but not surprising."

"Ninety years old with seven sons." Duke Malco spoke direly. "None of them the clear heir. The eldest with a kind heart, but a womanizer and a fool. The youngest a backstabbing snake and all manner of noble and sordid men between them. When he finally passes, there will be a bloodbath-"

"Surely just-" Count Aaron tried to interject.

"Civil war." Duke Malco stressed.

A silence fell down on top of the two men. Malco lowered his eyes back on the chessboard and did not raise them again as the Count shifted in his seat uncomfortably, pulling at his tunic's collar and wiping sweat off his brow with his other hand. In the distance, a murder of crows which had taken residence in a tree were cawing relentlessly

and along with it the relative silence carried with it a sense of dread.

"So." Count Aaron said then paused, carefully planning his words. "What precisely is the reason you have summoned me, my liege?"

"I have concerns about our neighbors to the east. Your realm lies closest, so I thought it only prudent to ask you personally if you are sure about our own collective safety." The Duke stated plainly. "I have become less concerned about the Brightwall as of late and more concerned with our other neighbors. I believe peace and wealth has rotted the heads of many rulers within the Empire. The threat of monster incursions and the spread of demon realms has almost vanished in the last few decades and I believe that has emboldened the power jockeying and greed among many of them. Yaleria is a small but rich Duchy, but with it comes the responsibility of maintaining and spilling blood upon the Brightwall."

"I would not think so lowly of our brothers in arms, my liege-"

"I would, Count Aaron. When the Emperor finally perishes the whole Empire will teeter on the brink of civil war. When the authority of the crown erodes and finally crumbles..."

The Duke slumped in his chair, his eyes still fixed on the chessboard. Count Aaron looked nervously to his left and right. Maybe the Duke had forgotten he was talking to someone?

"You shouldn't worry yourself so much, good Duke. A few blows here and there while the princes jockey for the Emperor's throne and a couple skirmishes behind their backs while they fight will ultimately be of no consequence."

"Of no consequence to the nobles of the Empire. What of the people? The peasants and the serfs? The fields you fight in are their farms. The storerooms you supply your armies from, their livelihoods. The comfort your soldiers seek, their daughters. If the Empire breaks down into civil war, the ones who will benefit will be the monsters. Their demon realms will swell with refugees and into their embrace the people will flee. The nobles care not. They are seldom targets, Not anymore. They seem to forget how enticing the monsters are when one has nothing."

"W-well, my liege, surely..." Count Aaron stuttered.

"That's enough, Count Aaron. I've bothered you enough already with my grievances. There is only one thing more that you need to know before returning home: On the west shore of Jelm Lake I plan to muster as a show of force to King Franx. His patrols have strayed too close to the border one to many times. I have asked the other counts to levy their forces. If the power of the crown does crumble soon, I fear Franx would not hesitate to cross over aggressively."

"Y-yes, my liege! I will muster my men immediately when I return!" Count Aaron rose to his feet and slammed his fist against his chest in salute as she shouted.

Duke Malco didn't say anything. His eyes were still fixed on the chessboard before him. Aaron remained standing for almost half a minute before he finally got the impression that he had been dismissed. At the very least the Duke did not become angry when the count slowly inched his way out of the room. It would have been a rather comical scene if there was anyone else there to watch it. As he approached the doors exiting the room, they once again opened on their own and showed the count out. When the door gently shut behind him, the guards silently escorted back out the castle. The eerily quirt castle where he hardly encountered another soul. He wanted to walk faster, but his escort kept the same lumbering pace until they escorted him beyond the final doors leading back outside. The carriage was still waiting there and he wasted no time quickly getting inside.

Count Aaron was sweating even more fervently than before, and his handkerchief was soaked through and through by now. While the count shifted uncomfortably in his seat he knocked on the wall of the carriage to signal the driver to leave, but the carriage went nowhere no mater how many times he knocked. Seated across from him, the black cloaked figure which hadn't budged all this time slowly and methodically moved to knock on the wall of the carriage and it took off at a slow leisurely trot out of the castle. The count craned his neck toward the windows every so often to watch the castle dissolve and finally vanish into the distance behind the wall of pines.

"I trust your visit was... Insightful." The black cloaked figure said at last when the castle was finally out of sight minutes after departing.

"I managed to leave with my head on my shoulders. That is enough." The count barked.

"I told you. Duke Malco isn't the kind of man who does anything without concrete evidence. I understand and sympathize."

"The Duke confided in me that he is gathering up his forces on the west coast of Jelm Lake. If I am to be given any chance to strike the time would be now."

The black cloaked figure sighed heavily, much to the irritation of the already nervous and irritable count.

"Count Aaron. I am neither a politician nor a warrior, but even I understand that is a trap."

"What?" Count Aaron growled.

"Why would the Duke invite you and you alone to make such a sensitive declaration? Given your anecdotal evidence, logic dictates that the most likely conclusion based on the assumption that

the Duke has been paranoid as of late; Malco has told a different story to the other counts and lords. Surely, committing your troops to an ambush is what Malco suspects and has planned for. You'd betray your intentions and next time you would not retain your head's current status as being attached to your neck. I suggest you do nothing and let the suspicions the Duke has for you subsi-"

Count Aaron didn't seem to appreciate being made light of and being lectured by the cloaked man. He leaped from his seat and aggressively seized the man by the collar and pushed him up against the back wall of the carriage. The other man didn't resist and didn't even protest.

"Don't treat me as a fool. I am sponsoring you. I am the one in-"

"Please unhand me, sir." The man said, stressed the last bit ironically.

Count Aaron was taken aback, "What did you say to me?"

"For your own safety."

The count grit his teeth in anger, but before he could let go or shake the man even more violently an explosion of wood and splinters erupted behind him. A hand had punched through the carriage walls. The horse whinnied and reared and the carriage came to a stop as a small but powerful hand wrapped itself around the count's neck and pulled him backwards into his seat. A head had also came crashing in from the outside, cloaked in black but now with the hood down. A girl with stitches on her face and mismatched eyes glared at the count.

"The hell you doing?" She growled with fierce eyes."

The count couldn't respond, the cold hand with its stitches and patches of different colored skin was clasped tightly around the count's throat and he labored in vain to breathe.

"Patches." The cloaked man calmly chided. "He cannot speak if you continue to strangle him. You can release him. I think he understands now."

The cold hand released immediately and the girl retreated from the hole in the carriage. A quip and energetic, 'Alrighty'o!' sung out as she did, a complete about face to the tone and demeanor she had just shown. It didn't sound like the kind of girl who suddenly displayed a savage and impressive show of brute strength. Count Aaron slumped down in his seat as he rubbed and soothed his aching throat, coughing and hacking wildly the entire time.

"You..." Count Aaron said judgmentally between coughing.

The man leaned forward and his face appeared from behind the shadow of his cowl as Count Aaron looked back up at him.

"That's Professor Vee, dear count..." Vee raised a finger, then another as he spoke. "Do no harm, fund my research and do not

interfere. All of that in return for delivering Yaleria to you. Have you forgotten the contract you signed already?"

Vee adjusted his clothes back into proper order while Count Aaron continued to cough and try to put his throat back into proper working order.

"I understand your high birth and position may make it difficult for one such as yourself to work with someone of low birth such as myself, but if we cannot come to some mutual professional respect... I will ultimately be forced to take some precautionary measures. Now. If you will forgive me, I am also on edge, it has been almost two weeks since I last finished my last project. I am eager to begin immediately. There is so much to learn from the Shadelands, my heart palpitates at the very thought of all the potential data to be gathered."

A wry and twisted smile spread across Vee's face as he spoke. Count Aaron's face went pale at the sight of it.

"All I need is someone more cooperative than the good Duke to let me do was I please."

***

Back in the stone walls of Brightcastle Duke Malco sat unmoving ever since Count Aaron had left. His eyes were stilled locked onto the chessboard. At last he picked up the sole remaining black knight and moved leftward near, but out of range of white's queen, his other pieces a scant few moves away from putting white's king in check. As soon as he leaned back in his chair, a white pale hand with slender fingers and long fingernails daintily picked up a white bishop and placed it just a few squares diagonally.

"Checkmate in two turns." A soft feminine voice cooed.

Malco leaned forward, his hands on the arms of his chair and studied the board. His shoulders slumped and he reached out with one finger to topple his own king and let it fall sideways. He then leaned back into his chair and looked up. Seated opposite of him, in the other chair where Count Aaron had just been, was a woman. Dressed in a thin and light black dress with revealed thighs, high black stockings, ethereal and ghostly looking silky scarf and adorned with priceless jewellery. A low cut top to the dressed barely held in place a licentious and large pair of pale white breasts. Her bare slender shoulders quivered as the woman chuckled playfully, sensually crossing one leg over the other and resting her hands with arms clothed in long black gloves on top of her knee.

A beguiling and warm smile spread across her face, also white as snow, her face beautiful as though it were divine and otherworldly. A jeweled tiara rested atop her platinum blond hair which cascaded down her back and over her shoulders, but beyond those bangs were

a pair of eyes that struck anyone who looked upon them with equal parts enchantment and terror. Irises a bright crimson red and her pupils an eerie white. Malco's face didn't seem to register either. He stared at the woman stoically, as though his face was frozen that way.

"Two of five." She said, teasing Malco. "We can begin the final game whenever you wish. Take as much time as you need for each move."

Malco didn't say anything.

The woman pouted. "Aw. Please don't be that way. Try to have some fun."

"I haven't the time for this..." Malco complained.

"My my. But you do. You will. If you lose just once more that is." She said while smiling warmly.

She got up from her chair and slowly walked, one heel in front of the toe at a time around and behind the Duke's chair.

"The Empire is in trouble. I made an oath. I have to protect the Emperor's..." Malco trailed off speaking to no one in particular.

"Don't think of the Emperor, or his Empire. Just think about you... And me." The woman said seductively as she slowly traced his cold, white and pale fingers along the duke's body and up to his face. "I don't want to hurt anyone. I just want you, so let's play the last game. I promise no one in Yaleria will ever come to harm ever again. Not from anyone."

The woman slowly turned his face toward her and then brought her own face closer and closer, but Malco quickly pulled away and stood up and walked toward the balcony to look over the Brightwall far in the distance. He placed his hands on the railing and held his weight up as he let built up stress in his shoulders out into the stonework.

"I love when you play hard to get too." The pale woman said, suddenly appearing, seated on the railing beside him.

She had either followed him without making so much as a noise or she just as suddenly appeared like she seemed to have done before.

"Victory to the first to win three games?" Malco said, looking for confirmation.

"Absolutely. I do so adore that old game. I was so pleased to learn you felt the same way." The woman said with glee. "That was the terms. To whomever wins three games first, the loser must comply to a wish the winning party makes."

"To stay behind the Brightwall, forever..." Malco said gravely.

"Be mine." The woman said looking longingly at the Duke.

"With a monster? Pha!" The duke spat. "My family has kept your kind behind the wall for thousands of years. Do you think I would

dishonor my family by doing something so disgraceful?"

"My my. Think of it as a political marriage to settle old grievances." The woman said smiling.

"I, nor Yaleria or the Empire are your playthings!"

"I would never dream of it. You love your land and your subjects dearly, therefore, so do I. There can be peace between the Shadelands and Yaleria for all eternity."

"Then put the whole of the Empire at your feet? Do not play me for a fool!"

"I could not care less about the Empire. I only care about you."

"I care for the Empire!" Malco yelled. "And while you play your games with me and try to snare me in your web it lies on the brink of chaos. Do you think me dull that I would not suspect its weakness and your arrival and tempting me as mere coincidence?"

"Word seldom comes into the Shadelands. The wall makes it difficult." The woman joked.

"The whole Empire right now could be likened to a dry tinderbox. One errant fool could be enough to light the whole of it ablaze!"

"I think the good sir doth protest too much." The pale woman said wistfully. "Forget about all that for now. Reset the board when you are prepared. I plan to make it the final game. Until then, bye bye." The woman sang while waving.

When Malco looked over, he found nothing but empty air. The woman had vanished once again.

"One errant fool, huh?" He repeated.

He hoped for once what she said was true. That he was just paranoid.

Chapter 49

Twisting, turning, tumbling and tracked, Susan and I fled through makeshift corridors. We rushed by towers and walls of wooden crates that fabricate a multilayer labyrinth; faint light from alchemical lamps swing to and fro above us and cast long obscuring shadows in all directions. We ran, ducked and leaped our way through the maze, away from about a dozen or so men and women, armed to the teeth and brimming with potent magics. Our breathing was haggard, our legs becoming like logs but if we got caught or held down, that would only interfere with Chris and Rose's own escape plan. I would have preferred sticking together instead of splitting up, but none of us really had a choice in the manner. That option was taken away from us about ten minutes ago. Our only saving grace was that those after us seemed to be in just as much disarray as we were.

There wasn't anymore time to make heads or tails of the situation because as I peeled around another corner I was forced to an immediate stop. I felt Susan crash into my back which stopped the girl cold. Her nose tweaked against my head. She gave out a quiet little yelp, a pang of guilty tickled me and I'm sure a lecture would come soon after. There wasn't any time for either though; ahead were two armored men coming into an intersection dead ahead. They only needed to sweep their sights to the left to see us and their hunting party would have finally got us in their sights. Our diving into this mad maze would be for nothing. The two of us didn't have much of a chance if our escape was based solely on how fast we could run, it relied on being slightly less lost than our pursuers.

Before Susan could muster her complaint I quickly seized her by the shoulder and pulled ourselves back. Back against the wall and placed my hand over her mouth and pressed in close to her. She mumbled in protest and furrowed her brows in anger. We were still breathing hard and our chests competed against each other in the tiny alcove I had shoved ourselves into. Susan, I know it must feel like drowning, trying to breath through your nose right now, but please put up with it! She struggled at first, but when the faint and distinct clank of steel on wood got close enough her ears twitched and she froze up. We held our breaths instinctively. We remained still as statues and deathly silent as the two men slowly walked past.

"-this way was a shortcut to forth deck?" One berated the other.

"It is." The other replied indignantly. "We just wait here and they'll probably pass by."

"Yeah? Why's that?" The lead man said sarcastically as he came to a stop.

"How else do you think I got to the mess hall so early yesterday?"

"Because you skip out on training and sleep back here where no one finds you?"

"Ouch. Your words hurt me, Derrick. Some of us don't need to go around doing pest control to make sure they keep up to snuff."

"The job is good pay, but just sitting on this boat for three days hoping something might happen was driving me insane." The lead man started walking again, much to the chagrin of the other that showed on his face. "Now hurry up. I'm not gonna just sit here and wait for maybes when everyone else is pulling their weight."

"Hells! I said we could just wait here! I'm twenty.... forty percent certain they gotta pass through here! Hey! Listen to me you stupid-" He shouted as his voice gradually got quieter and quieter.

When the shouting finally died, I remembered to pull my hand away from Susan's mouth and she immediately took in a huge gasp of air and coughed a couple times. Once she got her breath back, she put it to good use right away. She shoved me back to rebuild her personal space and glower at me.

"I am certainly not some simpleton who cannot take a simple warning to keep her silence! It is completely unnecessary to muffle me!" Susan said quickly, all at once; it was a little impressive she could get all that in on one starved gasp of air.

"Well, forgive me for not being perfectly calm at the moment!" I snarled.

"Do not raise that manner of tone with the likes of me! Your sarcasm is not charming at this time."

"I'm well aware this is all a bit worse than a wrong turn at Albuquerque. I'm doing my best to get us out of here, so stop getting on my case for every little thing. It's not helping."

"Not helping?" Susan retorted. "Taking my advice closer to heart would have prevented this whole debacle prematurely."

"Then why didn't you say so before?"

"I did say so before!"

"I-!"

I silenced myself when my temper finally caught up to me and my hushed yells almost become audible. I took a few breaths to calm myself down and stared down Susan who did the same while glaring at me. It took some time, but my hot head finally started to cool down and where I was finally come back to me. This certainly wasn't the time to be at each other's throats. I could feel my expression softening.

"Look I-"

"Pharaoh I-"

We both tried to speak at the same time and cut one another

off. The two of us came to a premature stop and looked and each other again, a little embarrassed. Alright, I'll take the hint and-

"I'm sorry I-"

"I was out of-"

We stopped again, this time less embarrassed and more frustrated.

"Can't I just-"

"Allow me to-"

Third time did it. We were back to glowering at each other.

"Ugh, gross. Fighting like an old married couple." Came a woman's voice from up high.

Susan and I shook and then froze on the spot. We were one-third embarrassed, one-third shocked and one-third terrified. Kneeling down and in firing posture and position was a young woman; with ebony skin, short cropped and curly black hair, an orange bandana covering her mouth, dressed in tight full suit of light brown leather armor with an untaught bow in her hands. She was within point blank range; no more than four meters away. I could see her nose wrinkled and her eyebrows furrowed in disgust as she watched us, but that quickly gave way and she joined us in being shocked. I don't think she intended to speak out loud like that, we hadn't even noticed her presence until just then.

"Aw, shit." She said as she fumbled for a second then quickly notched the arrow still idle in her other hand and then hurriedly pulled back the bowstring.

She had the advantageous position, but she had lost the element of surprise and I was going to waste her squandered opportunity. I seized Susan by the paw and yanked her along as I quickly dived out-of-the-way and sped off around the corner at a sprint. She only gave a momentary bit of resistance as her dead weight was tugged along, the arrow from the archer's bow whizzing through the air, slipping between the empty space between the hairs of Susan's bushy tail before thudding harmlessly into the wall of a crate. I could hear the archer's disappointment with a click of her tongue as we vanished from her line of sight before she could produce another arrow from the quiver at her hip.

"Boys!" I heard her shrilly call out. "I got em. Close in!"

Great. That's just fucking great. I was full out sprinting now. At least sprinting as fast as I could through the narrow passage ways between the crates. You can only accelerate and safely decelerate so fast, I had to hope that problem was the same for everyone else on this deck right now. When I stole a glance over my shoulder that optimism was quickly shot down when I watched the woman running along the top of the crate walls and towers after us. Waiting for another

perfect shot; forcing me to take a sudden left turn instead of a right when she notched another arrow on the run and fired it toward us, splinters flying as it struck the wooden walls of the crates nearby.

After a few winding turns, Susan got her footing back and I wasn't struggling not only to pull her up but along, but I still had a death-grip around her soft fluffy paw; her digits wrapped around my own hand as well. We were running on luck now, and the odds were quickly accumulating against us. The fact that we hadn't run into a dead end and then forced to backtrack into the waiting maws of our pursuers was becoming a more distinct possibility as time went on. It didn't help that Susan had seemed to retreat back into deep thought even as we ran. Her expression had returned to a neutral and calm expression while her eyes were downcast, even as we were running. I can't say I'm not touched she trusts me that much, towing her along to safety, but a little intuition from someone who used to manage a maze would be of great help right now. Just a thought, pay it no mind, Susan.

"Cut em off right!" Came gruff man's voice from elsewhere in the maze.

I took the next left.

"Hurry it up!" A young boy's voiced cracked, "Circle around to the front! Right! Right!"

I meandered and took a long circling series of lefts and then dove forward.

"You idiots! Shut up!" The archer from before shouted over the maze for everyone else to hear. "They can hear you too!"

"There goes our last advantage." I lamented out loud; sighing. "Would have preferred they went on being just as stupid..."

A combined IQ between the two of us that's a few more points than all theirs combined. I soon lost our most precious advantage when I was forced to come to another sudden halt. In a clearing amidst the forest of crates that was about the size of a master bedroom, was a sole man of the cloth. A young man in simple brown robe with a Friar Tuck haircut. Although he appeared to be just a simple priest, there was an intimating aura around him... I think It was the massive hammer strapped to his back... And the huge chain draped around his neck. It was some kind of necklace, a perverted thuggish looking rosary that held a large wrought iron holy symbol around his chest. The mass of iron looked like a shining star and you could probably wrap your fist around it and use the iron spikes as a weapon in itself. His frame was a little wide, but considering how easily he was standing there without care in the world or any strain in his face told me it could easily be muscle. After all, what kind of person wears something that looks like it weights ten kilos around their neck like that?

None of that mattered though, it could by anyone loitering there; the fact that someone was blocking the way was bad enough as is. If Rose or Chris were here, I'm sure that mountain of fat and or muscle could be shoved out-of-the-way or restrained, but neither Susan nor I were confident or capable of doing either. We also couldn't afford to sit here crouched and hiding behind these crates. No matter how hard I looked I couldn't spot the archer running around above us, but I don't think our shaking their sights will last for long. If we don't keep slipping through the holes in their nets, we'd get tangled up eventually.

"We might have to make a break for it and try to push through." I whispered.

"Just as well." Susan replied. "From my estimates: We have covered sufficient ground that we should find ourselves in proximity with the stern of this barge should we carry on straight ahead. There we will secure a passageway to the higher decks."

"Is that what you were trying to figure out all that time?" I said a little amazed.

Just what kind of photographic memory does this girl have? All that running, covering all that distance to and fro and she's that confident she knows where we are on the floor? Confident enough she has a bird's eye view on our location by simple deduction and not observation?

Although my voice betrayed a spark of excitement, I tried to keep us grounded in reality, "We're not gonna last much longer on our own. We're gonna have to meet up with Rose and Chris then get off this boat."

"How are you positive either Rose or Chris still have yet to be captured or neutralized?" Susan asked.

"Padre!" A voice came from within the maze. Susan and I ducked down fully into cover as another man came out of breath into the clearing. "Padre! You the only one here? Whatever... We need healers on third deck!"

"Calm down. We're closing in on the man and the wolf." The priest calmly responded.

"We got casualties building up on third and second! These men need attention."

"Francis... I said-"

"Yesterday, Padre!" The man screamed urgently.

The priest studied his ally's expression and heaves for breath for a few seconds before he eventually broke down, "Very well. Take me there."

I turned out of cover to watch Francis, some kind of warrior by the looks of it, lead the priest away and leave the clearing open. It was

a lucky break. I looked over to Susan, who also seemed to be looking back at me with an expression that told me she was just as flabbergasted with our good fortune as I was.

I answered her question by delivering the punchline dryly, "Just a hunch." After I vaulted over our cover I offered my hand toward Susan. "Come on, we gotta hurry!"

Susan didn't have to be told twice, she wrapped her paw around my hand and we bravely dove into the opening at the far end of the clearing. As we disappeared back into the maze, I heard the archer organizing the chase from behind yelling and screaming. A quick glance over my shoulder showed me her silhouette, stomping her foot and pointing in our direction. The sight would have normally filled me with overconfidence and an urge to throw a few obscene gestures back in return. That urge wouldn't last for long, a flood of mercenaries came out of the literal woodwork. From where were just hiding and into the clearing behind us all the men and women chasing after us were converging on our location. I could only eye about fourteen of them before I decided looking where I was going was a lot more important.

"Laven?" Susan implored me with a concerned looked on her face.

I think my face might have just gone pale for a second there.

"Just don't look behind us!" I shouted out.

Before I let curiosity get the better of her I gave her arm a yank and pulled her along. If she was correct, we'd soon come to a stairwell to the upper levels. Perhaps all the way to the top deck if we were lucky. I don't care if it's a lifeboat or having to churn my insides with flight sickness from being carried around by Chris. Anything to get off this damn boat. The pleading in my head was met with a sudden explosion of fire on our upper right. Something had collided with the tower of crates and sent splinters showering in all directions. The smell of brimstone and a burning sensation filled my lungs immediately. Amidst the splinters of wood showers of oats and singed vegetables.

"We must be heading the right way! If these bastards were holding back the artillery all this time... They have to be getting desperate!"

When I looked back at Susan her eyes were shut and she was muttering a string of words completely foreign to me. Once again, she opted to remain unfocused on what was happening to her right now. Susan, I'm flattered you trust me that much, but this isn't the time.

"Susan! Come on! Pick it up, we gotta keep it at full speed!"

Not a word back. Well, not a word I could understand. Was she... Was she praying? That's not a good vote of confidence to how hairy the situation is getting... A few words of prayer might very well be what the two of us needed a few minutes ago. I'm not sure how

punctual and reliable the old gods of this world are, if they're still listening, but as we came around one last corner, a barred and locked door before us, so too were about four other mercenaries. They were, armed, armored, lock stock and barrel; ready to leap out and tackle us, skewer us for a quick end if we were lucky. My time in captivity and near misses haven't left me with the greatest impression of hospitality that the people of this world offer to their prisoners.

I came to a skidding stop, only a few meters before those waiting in ambush. This time Susan did not collide into my back, instead this time she pulled me closer to herself and wrapped one of her arms around my shoulder. She was still muttering the last few words of prayer until she finally opened her eyes with a spark of light to them. A golden glow illuminated from the tattoos on her stomach and from thin air gold particles formed into her golden staff, the chains of the scale jingling ominously, louder than they should. Those words of prayer then turned into thundering words of power and a sweep of her staff in front of us caused the very air to shake. From the tip of the staff a force pushed away the air itself with such force that I think it gave off a sonic boom. I instinctively went to cover my ears, but I hardly heard anything at all. It was as though- no, there was a barrier around us.

A concussive blast tore through the air and caught the mercenaries in front of us off guard, lifting them off their feet and throwing them backward and off to the side. Those flung into the crates found that their momentum wouldn't be stopped. Even the heavy crates filled to the brim with food and trade goods were blown aside in the fireless explosion of light and force. The door in front of us was blown completely off its hinges, the locks and bolts holding it steadily in place torn off the wooden frame completely as the door cracked and folded under the force of the blast.

"Go!" Susan shouted as she pushed me forward.

I was caught off guard as I stumbled forward through the door and tripped, tumbling and slamming into the wall at the base of the stairwell. Susan followed closely behind, still shimmering with light. Glowing like a beacon. Behind her I saw something quite impossible. The scattered crates which had been thrown in every direction were suspended in mid air, spinning and rotating, but unable to fall or fly off into the distance. To their credit, the mercenaries were not deterred, they duck and wove their way to pursue us. Archers readied their bows and lined up shoots through the debris field and what looked like wizards and sorcerers, their hands crackled with magical energies.

As a flurry of arrowheads, crossbow bolts, fireballs and magic missiles rained down toward us Susan calmly waved her staff again and with another luminescent glow the debris field was rocked by another shock wave and what had been cast out in all directions

collapsed back in on itself like it was all attached to rubber bands which had reached their limit. The ship rocked under our fear and tremors shook under our feet as the sound of crashing wood and explosions ripped through even the pile of debris were the doorway had just been. Whatever force had exploded on the other side, it certainly wasn't enough, a barrier of debris had blocked off the doorway completely.

I was still a little shell shocked, but I stood back up, blinking idly. I reached out my hand to make sure what I was seeing was real, not some illusion I was seeing as I laid back out there on the floor with spears in my stomach and arrows sticking out of my back. When I touched Susan's shoulder, it was about the same time that her knees gave out. I quickly grabbed both her shoulders, but that wasn't enough, so I had to wrap my arms underneath her own and do nothing else but slowly let her down as we collapsed down onto the floor. There the two of us sat, Susan breathing heavily, her shoulders shaking. The tattoos on her stomach shaped like exclamation marks slowly flicking and dimming before returning to their normal dull white, contrasting with her tanned skin.

"Susan?" I asked tentatively. "What the hell was that?"

"Worry... not... Pharaoh... Laven... Just a parlor trick, but one I have not performed for quite some time. I apologize... for tiring so readily."

What I'd like to know is why she did it. How could she have predicted...

"Do you just have that kind of ace up your sleeve all the time?"

"Of course not." She retorted. She quickly changed the subject, "You are correct in assuming they are stupid. For while many of them are not so bright..." She pointed to her ears. "Not intelligent enough to learn the proper lesson from their previous mistakes."

It took me a second, but I couldn't hide the snide grin on my face, "Yeah yeah. Nice play."

"Save your platitudes, Laven. Assist me by placing me back upon my feet...Furthermore, watch your hands." She coldly said.

I only noticed now that I had wrapped my arms around her in a full embrace across her chest. Pulling my hands back, I scooted across the floor toward the wall where I held my arms up in surrender. I did it on instinct, the cold tremor in Susan's voice had sent a shiver down my spine. My hands seemed to be of their own mind, they were in protest as they continued to flex and grope the air a few more times on their own. Susan did not even wait for my help, she pushed off the ground and got back to her feet. She looked back toward me with an expression that didn't seem to match her voice. I'm not sure if I hit my

head and just wasn't feeling it yet, but I'd say there was a deep red blush across her cheeks.

"Laven, do not dally. The debris will not hold forever. We must rendezvous with the others."

I sat there motionless and watched Susan as her tail wagged back and forth and her hips shack back and forth as she climbed the stairs toward the next deck. I shook my head and I sat there for a few seconds longer now that I had the chance. Just what the hell happened. Why did it happen and how the hell did we end up here like this?

Chapter 50

“Hiyah!” Rose's voice bellowed and shook the evening air.

Her sword came crashing down from above, a few centimeters short of cracking my skull open. I watched the wood blade cracked open a hapless stone instead, an unfortunate rock that was lying on the ground between us. The poor thing had been minding its own business on the forest floor just a moment ago. It was in good company now, because it had been completely split in twain. Obviously, I wasn't already terrified enough with Rose chasing after me swinging that plank around. I've had to watch the surrounding forest be systemically annihilated stone by stone and tree by tree as I fled and desperately dodged every slash and thrust. I scrambled backward and tried to take refuge behind another of the old growth trees that littered our surroundings.

“Woah woah woah! Time out!” I cried out desperately. “You said this was just sparring. You're gonna kill me if you hit me with that!”

Rose calmly stamped her foot on the ground, curled her talons into the earth, and then with a single pull, yanked the sword free. She had driven it into the dirt like a railway spike, the very thought about the forces involved in sent shivers down my spine. She didn't seem to share my level of concern, all she offered back was a mischievous smile and a playful snort as she rubbed the back of her free claw against her nose to wipe away some clods of dirt off her face.

“Kill ya? Nah. I'm only hitting ya with the stuff that can kill you when I know you can dodge it.”

So, she admits she has been delivering possible deathblows all this time...

“That's not the point, Rose! If you do hit with- Ack!”

I was forced back behind the tree when Rose leaped forward and took a swing at where my head was just a second ago like she was swinging around an axe. She struck the tree like she was dead set on chopping the massive old growth monster down. Even with just a wooden sword, the thick bark of the tree cracked and the sword disappeared into the trunk.

“If you hit me like I'm going to die!” I yelled.

“It ain't gonna mean a thing if I don't go all out.” Rose stated in a manner of fact way while she once again freed the sword with a

single yank. “And stop runnin' around and dodging. You've got enough practice with that already. Come on, try to hit me!"

She said the last bit in such a jovial manner you'd think we were just a couple of children playing a game of tag. The ear to ear smile across her face was almost disarming, almost. There was still evidence all around of mayhem like a tornado had torn through the area. If I was going to keep on living, I think I was going to have to disappoint her and continue playing cat and mouse. After all, mice don't survive by picking fights or standing up to their predators. I just had to last until Chris came back from scouting. If I could last that long, I'd run out the clock. Even Rose would have to relent, our strategy meeting is more important than this farce she calls 'training'.

I decided to capitalize on the precious few seconds Rose had to waste on this tree to push away, make a break for it and take cover behind another tree. I'm living my life second to second right now, so every second I could buy myself is precious. Turning my back, I tried to make a break for it. But I felt warmth on my back that started to get very hot, very quickly. When I turned around, Rose was already bearing down on me, her tail a raging inferno, her white toothy smile glistening with excitement. She's never that fast- No, she must have really decided to get serious. I suppose even a rat when cornered will try to bite. So that was her game... Get serious and force me to confront her. There wasn't much for me to do, my option were limited- No... Limited is too liberal a word; I only had one option: I had to parry.

In an act of desperation, I threw my wooden sword up in front of me. A fat lot of good that did, I didn't have the time to see she was going for a thrust. When my back slammed up against another tree I pretty much got rid of all my options to get away. In my dire straights, instinct took over and I shifted my head right and up against my shoulder. Rose's thrust stabbed into the tree truck, where my head had just been, a good four centimeters. Impressive, because it's just a blunt wooden sword after all. Okay, impressive is a bad choice of words. I rescind that word and replace it with 'terrifying'. The very sound of it cracking the thick bark was deafening as chunks of bark exploded outward like a bullet had slammed into it instead. If my head were there, I would have died for sure.

Such an aggressive attack, which was very Rose, was also equally risky. An opportunity had finally presented itself, maybe. If I just scored one hit, just one, she might relent a bit. Maybe just a bit. That is if she was just trying to prove a point.

With her left arm extended and her sword still stick in the tree, I made a large swing with the sword in my right hand. Her arm is crossed over her eyes, she'd have a hard time seeing it come from that wide, or so I thought. Her right arm darted out and she wrapped her claw around my wrist and caught me. She had a firm grip, I couldn't pull back. I'd be done for if I did nothing, so when she pulled her sword free I quickly darted out and grabbed hold of her wrist as well. We were both locked in place, trying to hold our sword arms still so neither of us could take a swing at the other.

We were stuck in a deadlock.; at least that's how Rose wanted it. Every time I tried to pull loose she'd let me make some gains before pulling back. Likewise, it took everything I got just to keep her still. She had a cocksure grin on her face as she was no doubt enjoying herself. It pissed me off. She said fight seriously. It doesn't mean a thing if you're not serious. Being tossed handicaps like that makes one part of me which is trying to keep me alive relived, but another more reckless part of me pissed on my pride was being trampled upon. My persuasions to keep the latter part quiet, mostly reassurances that getting carried away will lead to pain, oh so much pain, seemed to be falling on deaf ears as I felt my blood begin to boil.

I flared my teeth and growled as I let loose a growl as I tried to pull my sword free while pulling down on Rose's other arm to lower it down somewhere where it wouldn't be an immediate threat. Rose kept steady for a second and slowly let me break free, but when she tried to reverse it, like Casey at Bat it was too late. I had all the leverage, it only takes a couple kilos of pressure in the right places, that's just how joints work. A little rage goes a long way too as I started to push Rose back slowly even when she knit her brow together and tried to push back. Just a few more seconds and I start bending her over backward and she'd lose her footing, or not.

While I was busy pushing back, Rose shifted her weight, freed up one leg for a brief moment and swept my legs out from under me. I went tumbling down and I was too stiff and rigid from concentrating and exerting all my strength to do anything about it. I twisted around mid fall and slammed my arm first against the forest floor and rolled over in pain. That is until a weight fell down on my chest and pinned me down. My eyes were still unfocused and I was seeing stars when I heard another loud thunk as Rose planted her wooden sword into the dirt right next to me head. An overhand drive into the earth.

I lost. All the tension in my body melted into the dirt, the lactic acid built up made me feel like I might just sift into the soil like water. I shook my head violently to chase off the stars and I saw Rose sitting on my stomach. She pulled her claws away from the hilt of the wooden

sword and placed them on my shoulders. Her fiery tail was whipping back and forth behind her, the embers giving off a bit of a roar and crackle at every flick and during each swish.

“Good. Very good!” She said, bouncing up and down with excitement. “I almost thought you had me there for a second.”

I tried to make some snarky comment, but all I managed to do was groan and wince in pain. I was still out of it, I didn't even notice when her talons danced their way across my shoulders and chest to my cheeks where she squished them together in the palms of her claws.

“But you need to work on that tunnel vision. You leave too many openings.”

By the time my eyes focused and snapped to attention it was already too late: Rose's face came rushing up like a runaway truck and her lips wrapped around my own like that truck which came to its inevitable stop by wrapping itself around a lamppost. Rose's passions had run amok yet again as she was grinding her hips against my torso and squishing her breasts against my chest. My efforts to grab her by the shoulders and push her away so I could actually catch my breath were in vain.

“Ahem!” Came an abrupt and out-of-place cough.

Rose came back to her senses immediately and threw a dirty look in the direction of the sound. Sitting cross legged on a nearby boulder was Susan, with a book in her paws. She slowly and deliberately turned another page, the crinkle of the old paper echoing loudly in the silence. Then she lazily looked up to meet Rose's glare.

“I apologize. Did I interrupt?” Susan said, very passive aggressively.

That's enough to set Rose off for sure.

“Huh~?” Rose menaced like a gangster. “You wanna say something?”

Susan didn't seem intimidated at all when she calmly replied, “Yes. Please extradite yourself from Laven.”

The sheer audacity surprised even me, it certainly caught Rose off guard too who dropped character for a second with a dumbfounded look upon her face before she recovered.

“This is training time. “We all agreed on that, so back off.”

“All three of us agreed, yes. We agreed self defense would be crucial, yes. However... Laven will require healing and time to recover now.”

“Don't be treating Laven like some kind of weakling!” Rose shouted out pointing a talon at Susan incriminatingly. “He's way tougher than he looks! Needs work...” She muttered quietly under her breath. “But he's sturdy at the core, good foundation and fundamentals!”

Susan sighed, “That is not what I am referring to. Laven fell upon his arm at an unusual angle. It may be fractured.”

“No way!” Rose cheerfully denounced the notion as she playfully punched my arm.

Maybe it was because my head was still spinning and I was a bit stunned, but after getting that shot to the arm, a piercing sting from my arm spread out over my entire body and I shook in pain. I almost shouted out in pain, I still couldn't help but seethe through my clenched teeth. I was starting to think Susan was right and Rose must have hit the bullseye.

Rose gave out an awkward laugh, “Well. It's not like you always get to fight with two good arms... A luxury even. We can have another go! It's more real than tying on your arms up. You just have to last half the time! How long was that last time?”

“Fifty-four seconds.” Susan stated.

“See? Three seconds more than the time before that. Come on!” Rose cheerfully said as she tried to pull me up off my back by my good arm. “Try to last twenty-three!”

“Twenty-seven.” Susan said, correcting Rose.

“Ah, shut up!” Rose barked back.

Susan clapped her paws together, closing her book at last and set it down on the boulder she was sitting upon. She then jumped off and onto her feet and made her way over toward the two of us on the ground. Her eyes were serious and her voice empty of emotion but still carried weight to themselves

“Laven requires healing now. We cannot suffer any injuries at this juncture in time. We cross dangerous territories and cannot afford to suffer any handicaps.”

“You said you knew damn well how important this is. Back off.” Rose growled, her tail standing up and smouldering just like her sullen eyes that glared coldly at Susan. "Maybe you just don't get what kind of places we're gonna be walking through. We can't stick to forests or follow Marru River forever. There are a lot of places up here, not so far North, where people will take a swing at Laven just cause he's seen anywhere near one of us. If it happens that none of us are then when it happens..." She cast her eyes downward, a thought, an image she didn't want to see must have surfaced.

“You were also given the responsibility of procuring dinner tonight. I will not be the one arguing with Chris when she returns from her sortie and fresh game is not roasting over a hearth. Surely you have not forgotten?”

“That's not what I'm talking abo-” Rose was about to argue again, but then came a rumbling from her stomach.

The mere mention of food caused a stomach grumble loud and as she rubbed her belly probably a cramp painful enough that she could not longer ignore it. Gallivanting about the forest floor and destroying it with nothing but a wooden sword all this time had probably depleted a lot of her stored up calories. Rose's face contorted into a frown as it dawned upon her that she had lost the debate and didn't have a leg to stand on against Susan right now. Susan had resorted to end game early, Rose's insatiable appetite. Rose was left with no choice but to slowly stand up and relieve me of the weight which was pressing down on my chest and making breathing laborious. I took in a long hard breath in celebration.

Rose walked with heavy feet over to her pile of things near the center of the little camp we had set up only a short distance away from our area of rampaging. She collected her sword and a few other odds and ends of survival gear before heading off to hunt. Her shoulders were slumped the whole time. She threw a few longing and wistful glances back toward me. Perhaps a little melodramatically. It was an odd thing to watch and I have to confess it worried me. Rose, this isn't the end of Casablanca, you know?

“Laven... This way please.” Susan ordered as she appeared beside me.

She graciously waved her paw over a nearby stone. With my one good arm, I pushed myself off the ground then cradled my injured arm. Susan supported my weight as I stumbled my over toward the boulder and sat myself down. It wasn't much bigger than a stool and Susan sat down seiza in front of me. She reached out with her paws and took the hand of my fractured arm and slowly, gently massaged her fluffy digits up and down its length. I winced in pain several times as she pressed down on, no doubt to find exactly where I was injured.

“You allow that brute too much leniency.” She said, finally breaking the silence.

“I actually agree with her... To a degree.” I said then backtracked.

Susan looked up with a surprised look on her face for a second, followed by a brief gloom before she put her poker face back on, “Injuries such as this will continue to surmount until you make it perfectly trenchant that her regimen is overbearing.”

“I think she just shows concern differently. I did get knocked around a bit back at the castle...”

Susan's paws came to stop and she cast her eyes downward so that I couldn't read the expression on her face. An awkward silence descended on the clearing as we both came to a standstill. Not too surprising; that was only a couple days of two weeks ago. Once again, I had come very close to death. I was on the ground, down for the count and one finishing blow away from being snuffed out for good. If the princess had not decided to sacrifice her humanity and innocence... I wouldn't be alive right now. I was trying not to dwell on it, but I'm sure it was something that the three girls were not capable of doing so easily.

Chris had been hanging over my shoulder going at length over a million other ways I could have handled the whole scene 'cooler'. About seventy percent of them involved doing thing that were physically impossible for me and another thirty percent too embarrassing. However, I could see from the root of her message, was looking out for my safety. She had a penchant for the dramatic and a way of looking at the world that wasn't exactly accurate or grounded in reality. However, that world she saw was a much brighter place. I can't blame anyone who falls for it and I certainly do not knock anyone who fights for it.

Rose's 'training' regimen is probably borne from the same concern. If I was going to keep throwing myself in harm's way, I had better be able to handle it. If only she had more common sense, maybe she'd realize that beating someone with a stick day in and day out isn't always the best way to learn anything. You don't always make something stronger by constantly beating and hitting it. Sometimes these things break instead. I suppose that simple world view she sees reality through is one of the reasons she seems to have gotten along so well with Chris. Fools usually find good company with one another.

At the end of the day I can't blame Rose. Even when arguing with Chris it was painfully obvious she was just desperate. Desperate to make sure I wasn't mere moments from a coup de grâce ever again. There was only one way to assure that in that messed up head of hers: 'If he can stand up to me, I only have to be afraid for him so far as I'm afraid of anything else.' That's a tall order though. Chopping into iron bark trees like these with just a wooden sword... I think that's a little beyond what's humanly possible...

I looked down at Susan who was still averting her eyes and had not moved since and solemnly said, "I'd do it again."

Susan raised her face and met my gaze unflinchingly. I was the one doing the flinching though, she was wearing a rare warm smile on her face and soft eyes.

“I know.” She said warmly. “I understand that is the kind of man you are. I felt as such the moment I first laid my eyes upon you.” I was a little embarrassed, but then her tone suddenly changed back. “Now please remain still. This may be painful.”

The marks on her abdomen glowed a pale green and a pale green aura surrounded her paws. My arm which was wracked with the stabbing pain like it had been pierced with a thousand pins and needles was replaced with a tingle as though my whole arm had fallen asleep. That didn't last long before I felt at first a dull pain that slowly became a serious throbbing pain as though an invisible hand made out of fire was squeezing my very bones together and soldering them back into one piece. I winced in pain and almost fell over backwards off the stone. I would have, but Susan was holding onto me tight and wasn't planning on letting me go.

“Susan.” I called out to her through clenched teeth. “What do you think you're-”

“Please bear with it, Laven.” She said rather coldly.

Had I done anything to offend you, Susan? What's with the passive aggressive treatment? I don't remember healing hurting this much.

At last Susan's glow subsided, but my arm still felt like it was being assaulted with the pins and needles from before. Susan didn't seem quite ready to call it off, tell me to take two and call her in the morning. She moved down from my arm to fingers and caressed them, moved the digits of her paws through them.

“Fractured phalanges.” She said coldly. “Most likely from the trauma and shock of having to endure the forces involved in blocking that barbarian's blows while maintaining that white knuckled grip upon your sword. They'll swell eventually, the pain will be inevitable.”

“They don't look swollen to me.” I said breathing heavily to endure the dull pain.

“I recognize the signs, Laven.” She said coldly as she studied my hand. “It appears my magic is having even less an effect today than usual...”

Susan pulled my hand down and touched it upon her abdomen. My mind reeled in response. What was she up to? Why would she-? It was very warm though. She winced for a moment as my cold hands touched against her bare stomach, against the white exclamation mark tattoos. But she held them tightly against her as they once again glowed a pale green. I felt an even stronger flow of magic before. If that is magic I feel. My whole arm, up to my shoulder this time, tingled as though they had fallen asleep. When the light finally subsided, the tingling also subsided, but the dull pain merely returned again.

“Your hands are frigid.” She complained.

Are you looking for an apology? I can't do anything about that.

“Your injuries must be more serious than I originally anticipated.” She said as she guided my hand in her paws up her stomach to between her breasts.

A feeling of warmth spread not just into my hand but across my face as well and I could feel myself turn beat red. Even Susan who was still maintaining her signature poker face and calm and polite manner of speech was blushing heavily, a stark contrast to her appearance as a whole. Even through her top I could feel warmth radiate as she guided my hand over her ample left breast. My hand

was still twitching from the nerves in my arm spasming gently. As my hand was guided her heart and she pulled me closer till my hand sunk in. Even with the top in the way, I could feel a hard nub of flesh tweak in the palm of my hand and catch between the grooves between of my fingers.

“S-susan?” I said, my voice cracking, pleading for some kind of explanation.

“Shh.” She shushed gently. “Concentrate on my palpitations. Feel the flow from my heart to yours.”

“I'm feeling something, but it isn't your heart.”

Susan looked up, her expression telling me she wasn't amused that I wasn't taking this seriously. Whether through punishment or by design, she moved my hand up her breast toward her collarbone. Her breast bouncing and jiggling seductively back into place afterward. She then raised my hand in front of her face and she studied it carefully with her eyes.

“It appears this will require a more direct approach.”

My body felt like it was burning hot by now, it was a therapeutic feeling, like being wrapped in one great heat pad. There was still a dull throbbing pain in my arm that told me the injury was still there, but that wouldn't last long. Susan slowly caressed her 'fingers' over my fingers which had been cut, scabbed and blistered from many hard days of work and enduring Rose's training. Every minor scrap being sensitive to touch. Then Susan did what I certainly did not expect. She brought my hand toward her lips and her tongue licked the length of my index finger, slowly. I could feel the rough texture and wet saliva layer on my skin and then she pulled the finger into her mouth and held it there, coiling her tongue around it.

My finger felt a warmth completely unlike before, I could feel every ridge of Susan's tongue and I could feel it bathe and juggle within her damp mouth. The smooth, soft and puffy walls of her inner cheeks and the strong caress of tongue. Every cut and bruise on my finger seemed to melt away. After servicing my index, she invited my middle finger to join it as she sucked on them both, coiled her tongue around and kissed them both.

I had no words. I simply sat there while Susan continued. She had progressed to my thumb by the time I returned from my daze, which she was busy tumbling seductively, almost playfully in her

mouth. She looked up with a bewitching gaze that made me start to doubt this was about healing at all. I then noticed from the corner of my eye a brief glow of red light, but when I turned my eyes toward it, it was already long gone. My intuition led me to only one conclusion.

“Susan... That light.”

“Tis dusk now, Laven. It is merely the sun.” Susan replied as she finally released my thumb from her grips.

I noticed at last the dull pain in my arm had vanished completely. I could freely move it about, but I was most surprised when I inspected my hand and noticed that every cut, bruise and blister had vanished. The skin on my hand was healed, soft and smooth, no healing salve or moisturizer could hope to compete. While I held my hand up in front of my face to study it, Susan's paw slowly coiled itself around it, sliding her fluffy digits between my fingers. I looked up to see that she was no longer sitting before me. She pressed her weight up against me as she sat down and spread her legs to sit down on my lap. She wrapped her other paw around my free hand and she leaned in, running her tongue along my collar bone.

The very sensation caused my whole body to shudder, but I couldn't move. I couldn't even fall off my stone stool, I felt rooted in place. Susan's head and her long straight raven black hair below wafted a sweet smell into my nose and straight to my brain. Her jackal like ears atop her head twitched and tickled my chin as they did, and the sweet aroma wafting up toward me smelled like cinnamon scented shampoo. I swallowed hard, my eyes began to water and my lips stirred restlessly. My mind was still caught in second gear, unable to handle all the sensations at their current ferocity.

Susan pulled back and brought her face right before my own. She was blushing, her face was completely red, her tan skin becoming a rust like color. She pressed her forehead against my own, our noses brushing up against each other like an Eskimo kiss. A gentle smile and alluring eyes betrayed her usual calm straight-laced expression. Against my knees and shins, I could feel her bushy tail whap against them again and again as it swished uncontrollably behind her.

What was next was inevitable, I was sure of that. Without a word, without some long winded declaration or polite speech, she gently kissed my upper lip and then pulled back again. I didn't get a chance to interrupt or say anything before she pressed in again pressed her lips up against my own. She pushed all her weight onto

me and most of it felt as though it was bearing down on me from her lips. I could feel a sweet scent and hot air tickle me from her nose as she continued to press her lips against my own. I had long closed my eyes, but I could easily tell it was her tongue that finally began to lick over my lips, cheeks and nose. It was like some kind of instinct she was following, it was clumsy, awkward, but there was a sincerity behind it all. That alone had an irresistible and bewitching charm all its own.

A dull red light was still basking over the two of us, a red light I could see even through my shut eyes. There was a sinking feeling in my chest, a part of me remembered that light all too well, but I wasn't in any position to do anything about it. My body acted on its own in spite of my wandering thoughts when at last my body set into motion and I reached out with my tongue and met Susan. There was a slightly salty taste as our tongues collided and pressed up against each other. It only lasted for a moment, because our tongues slipped and slid past one another as they mingled and dove into one another's mouth. We sunk even deeper into each other as the kiss deepened and became increasingly passionate.

Both of us starved for breath pulled back at the same time and heaved warm breaths that tickled both our senses. My mouth was still moist and I could now feel the beads of sweet pool over my whole body. I could feel my shirt drench and cling to my skin, and everywhere it stuck, I could feel like pins and needles, although this time it felt like wells of endorphins. But that feeling alone was enough for my mind to kick into third gear. I stole a glance downward to see a dull red light in Susan's tattoos.

“Susan... Did you, curse me? Agai-?”

My words got stuck in my throat when I felt one of Susan's paws wrap itself around the bulge at my groin. I had been so focused elsewhere that I didn't even notice it till now; the mere contact over the denim of my jeans almost caused me to cum immediately. My underwear felt drenched regardless, so much precum must have built up already and I somehow didn't even notice. All this time, Susan was slowly building up a Curse of the Mummy. A curse that makes the victim's body many times more sensitive than normal. Its true purpose is to create a sensation so strong it ties a soul to the body, even after death, but I've learned from before it can be abused for other purposes.

“What an incurable Pharaoh you are, Laven.” Susan said

staring me dead in the eyes, her voice cold, calm and cool but her face lascivious and seductive. “Your faithful servant merely desires to attend to your wounds and look what has become of you.”

“Susan~...” I tried to say condemningly but unable to muster the proper willpower to do so.

My ability to resist had been sapped away and I couldn't muster the strength or the will to push away Susan's arms as her claws pinched the zipper of my pants. Neither could I do anything when her paw reached in, between the folds of my underwear and the soft pads of her paws seized my throbbing and bloated penis. The tissues had become so sensitive and coursing with so much blood that any more would no doubt be painful. Every squeeze, every tickle of soft downy fur caused an electric shock from my pelvis, up my spine that shook my brain. My vision nearly went white with each sensation. When my member was guided from its prison and exposed to the comparatively chill forest air, I nearly came again, but a firm grip squeezed around it, preventing me to do so.

I shook violently from the dry ejaculation, a great deal of pent up fluids held up in their place of origin. The muscles in my pelvis spasming in protest, each time sending another cascade of lightning to my already fried brain. Susan's paw had a death grip around the base and she had pinched it tight.

“Now now.” She rebuked. “Not so hastily. Not without physician's order.”

My eyes were unfocused, my breathing heavy, almost heaving, but my throat was still wet from the kiss before. My hands dropped helplessly to my sides as Susan held herself up on me by the shoulder and another gripped around my cock. Dragging my sensitive tip along the silky fabric of her black and golden ornate underwear, she used the glans to push aside the heavenly fabric to expose her own womanhood to the cold spring air. I was burning hot, but that didn't mean I couldn't feel the throbbing and burning heat that was coming from her own folds hovering only a few centimeters above my dick. Neither of us seemed to have the patience to embrace and enjoy this heat and anticipation because I soon felt a weight drop down upon me. A weight that enveloped and wrapped itself snugly and savagely around my erect penis.

I throbbed outward and each throb felt as though it would not stop and grow outward to infinity if not for the throbbing fleshy walls

that pushed back. A meeting of an unstoppable force and an immovable object, in perfect harmony. From just the insertion I felt a wave of contractions in my body, but once more I heaved dryly and I felt the traffic jam in my balls escalate to another level as they swelled uncomfortably and shook. A dull white light glowed from Susan as she panted, seated and straddled on top of me.

“Not yet.” She said. “Not yet.” Each time with heavy seductive breaths.

Susan's paws wrapped around me neck, her pelvis slid up against my abdomen and her breasts pressed up against my face. Her cheeks pressed against the top of my head and rustled my hair as she caressed and rubbed herself on me. I felt her take long breaths, her breaths tickle the top of my head as though she was greedily taking in every scent of me that she could. Her body writhed on top of me as she sunk further and further down my shaft until she reached the base and I could go in no further. I could feel myself being bent, squeezed and milked inside her as her vaginal walls coiled, squeezed and pulled me in. Our genitals greedily fought to embrace and when Susan lifted her hips for the first time, I wasn't sure if she dropped down on her own, or her body pulled her back down on top of me.

She started slow, shaking her hips back and forth and pushing off the ground with her 'feet' before lowering herself back down. It started rough and awkward, but it soon became a rhythm; a melody of each contraction and throb a note in percussion and each thrust the beat of a drum. It was hypnotic. Each and every movement felt like it was enough to have me explode, but a force was holding me back. It had to be Susan who was responsible. As though in a trance she kept ordering me to hold. Those orders soon sounded like pleading and eventually lost all pretenses and sounded like words drenched in ecstasy.

At last I felt my body finally shift into forth gear. My idle hands sprang into action and moved up to her hips, but unsatisfied they crawled up her to her slender smooth waist, across her tattoos and finally to her breasts. I slipped my hands underneath the fabric and in each hand seized roughly her breasts. Pulling her top up which now wrapped around her collar I guided one of the nipples into my mouth and teased it between my front teeth. While massaging the soft body of each with my hands, the nub that I kissed and sucked within my mouth, Susan's back arched as a shiver no doubt shot through her entire body. Her whole body contracted and a squeeze from down below that was more savage than all the others shook me as well. But

still I heaved another dry contraction in my pelvis. I think that one drove me insane.

I switched over to fifth gear and was firing on all cylinders. Any sense of reason or restraint I had left was on leave. My body which had mostly kept still, jumped into action. Perhaps it had done so because moving itself tickled every nerve in my body. Maybe it had done it on its own volition for my own safety, but that kind of caution and restraint had gone out the window. I rocked my own hips back and forth and kicked up my legs by the balls of my feet to raise Susan into the air and then drop her back down. The rough and unexpected movements caused her back to arc again, which in turn caused me another dry heave when the squeezed down again. It only spurred me on.

"Laven!" Susan screamed in ecstasy as her legs, the fluffy sensation of her calves and paws included, wrapped around my back.

She hugged and squeezed her body against mine even tighter.

"Laven~. Do you sense mine? I can feel yours. Your heart~ Laven?" She called out to me.

I had no sense or reason left to respond. I could only respond with my body and muster the energy to double my efforts.

"Laven~" She cooed. "Laven~ Love... I love you! Laven~!"

As though all contractions before were nothing but practice, a powerful surge exploded from Susan's body. From my shaft, to the glans and tip I felt Susan wring me out like a towel inside her. Our mingling lewd juices which had pooled and the constant slapping of our bodies against one another came to its crescendo. My balls which were heavy set, suddenly rose up and twitched uncontrollably. All at once I felt a surge and rush of semen pour into Susan with each and every pulsing of the muscles in my pelvis. A warm pleasurable feeling cascaded across my whole body as a pleasant feeling of release tempered by a savage bestial impulse shook the two of us. More spunk than I thought I could produce flowed out and into Susan's womanhood. It greedily lapped it up, but even it had limits as it oozed out from the folds where we were joined and trickled down her thighs and onto the forest floor.

I lost count of how many contractions my body shuddered with, but after about a minute they finally ceased. My body went limp and so did Susan who light girly frame rested on me, but was stilled curled

around me with her legs locked around my back. We breathed heavily, desperate to catch our breaths as though we had been drowning only a moment ago.

“What was that... Last part you said?” I asked between my gasps for air.

I pulled back to get a better look her face, but she was looking away in embarrassment, flushed a copper red with a vexed expression on her face. There wasn't much room for doubt, I'm pretty sure I knew damn well what she said, but she hardly seemed the type to scream it out like that. I suppose I just decided to bully her a little on impulse.

“I-I didn't mutter a thing.” She mumbled. She remained silent for a moment before she spoke again more clearly. “Twas more to your preferences. Was it not? You are more forgiving of rash and reckless action...”

Hold up. What was she going on about now?

“I-I too can be so bold! Just as... bold... reckless...idiotic...”

Is this all about...

“Hold up.” I said pressing my finger up against her lips.
She let slip a surprised yelp as her tail twitched and went rigid.

“I, in now way, intended to make you feel like that in any way. You're not Rose or Chris. Sure. I've been fortunate enough to run into some incredible and kind peo- monsters since I get here. I'm sure I'd be dead or worse without all your help. Don't think you have to fit a role or even act a way that you think I'd prefer. I don't want that, nor the guilt of having a girl do that. Being your usual cold self is enough. Besides, you bring an important level of well... sanity by just being there. I think-”

I stopped in my tracks as Susan cast her eyes downward again. A few droplets of water falling from her face onto the ground below. I was going to say something and reach out, but she rubbed her paws against her face before I could react. She looked up with her usual calm and cool face, even though her eyes were red and puffy. She let out a slight smile behind that mask of hers. No, I'm pretty sure that's just part of her, not just a mask.

“I suppose that I remain somewhat a fool in the end. Doubting that heart of yours again.” She said wistfully, if only slightly

so.

A silence and tension returned and hung over the two of us and I felt a magnetic like force pull our faces toward one another, but a sing song tune from above broke the spell.

“Da, da da dum, dum dum dum da, DUM DUM DA!” A voice rang out from above.

Circling and slowly descending from the skies above a tall green figure came in and with a loud crash slammed into the ground of the clearing by the camp fire. The impact shook the very earth. It was Chris, there was no mistaking that voice and appearance. Landing on one knee and one of the talons on her wing like some kind of super hero she quickly rose to her talons.

“Sssshaaaa.” She made a noise like the release of steam. Seeing Susan and I's backs to her only a short distance away she snapped to attention and saluted. “Scouting mission: Complete! Local surroundings: Recoded and Analyzed! I am ready to begin debriefing!”

Susan and I were still mostly locked in embrace, but Chris looked stoically, but then eventually confused.

“Master?” She said pensively, calling out to me.

“Ah.” I squeaked. “G-good work.”

Chris gave me a wide smile as though she was most pleased with even the faintest of praise.

“Is that Chris I hear?” Came another voice from the bushes.

From the forest Rose came in with a deer over her shoulders in a fireman's carry. She spotted Chris who was hard to miss but when she swept her eyes over to Susan and I, she stopped mid step, one claw suspended in mid air as color left her face. A critical hit, stunned. That didn't last for long though, she recovered quick enough, let the deer slide off onto the ground in a heap before her tail exploded in an inferno and she came marching toward the two of us in a fury.

Susan pulled out, straightened herself out the best she could and backed away from me all at once. She kept calm under pressure as the literal back-draft of heat come crashing down upon her. Rose went right up into her face like a drill sergeant and didn't hold back.

“What in the blazes is this!” She roared.

“A simple healing ritual for-” Susan calmly replied.

Deny deny deny. A classic tactic.

“Healing my tail!” Rose interrupted. “I leave for a few minutes and you're on him in a flash, like you're in heat, you damn mutt!”

Susan's facade twitched, the corner of her mouth tweaking. “Mutt?” She growled. “In heat!” She exploded. She pressed her forehead against Rose and they ground their heads against one another, giving off a sound not unlike two actual grind stones rubbing against each other. “What an odd accusation. I recall a certain individual attempting to mate with a certain injured person! I recall once reading about a saying about stones and glass houses. From the one ALWAYS in heat at that.”

Susan prodded Rose in the chest with one of her claws and she didn't take too kindly to it at all. She grabbed hold of it, they struggled and eventually locked their fists together in a mercy fight. Pushing against each other.

“Oh ho! This isn't about me now! Don't you dare dodge the question!”

“This has very much to do about you. In heat, you're always in heat. You never stop to think you might be causing Laven problems.”

“Huh~” Rose growled and twisted her head like a gangster. “So you've gotten to trying to not just tellin' me what I think but Laven too? Get bent!”

“Trying to browbeat and intimidate? Look twice in the mirror and dare say that in my presence again!” Susan fired back.

“Go crawl back to your cave ya mutt! You damn secondary. Laven's MY husband, not your chew toy. He loves me, I love him!”

“I also lo- I... Laven is also important to me as well!”

I was exhausted and slumped on the stone wondering what the hell I was going to do when I felt Chris' weight fall upon my back. Resting her chin on the top of my head as I could feel my back sink into her chest. I was still a little sensitive from the curse so the sensation sent shivers down my spine and into my groin.

“Why are we yelling?” She bellowed.

Chris and I watched as Susan and Rose didn't even notice anything other than their fight as they ground their foreheads together. I cradled my face in my hands and was wallowing in abject defeat at my inability to make it stop. When I pulled my fingers across my face in despair, I realized Chris' face was hovering just off to my side, studying me. It was then I realized my fly was still open and I was once again standing at attention down below. I hastily stowed it away in a panic. She continued leering at me with an expression I couldn't quite decipher.

“Master~?' Chris finally chimed. “I'm hungry. You're hungry too right?”

I simply nodded. Chris pulled her face back and I wasn't sure what expression she was making behind me.

“Very well! For our journey is long and arduous, evils strewn along our path, we must remain strong!... And well fed.” She declared thumping her wing against her chest.

Her stomach also growled loudly.

“Ahahaha.” She laughed mirthfully with a hint of embarrassment before strolling off to recover the deer carcass Rose had recovered.

Rose and Susan didn't seem ready to relent any time soon, maybe the smell of food would break it. I also sat there still unable to figure Chris out. Was she playing, that naive or is she really?... Anyways, my own stomach is starting to churn with hunger pangs, but not so much as my head was trying to figure out how exactly all four of us have managed to make it this far.

Chapter 51

“And that's the plan of attack!” The wyvern shouted.

Chris was so full of confidence while slapping her wing against a large sheet of paper hanging from the tree and she kept at it for emphasis. Her chest was puffed out with pride, but her plan wasn't met with cheers. It was instead met with indifference.

Except for the insistent rustle of paper and whap of her wing against her master plan, there was only silence. Susan sitting on my left shared my exasperated expression and Rose seated on my right...well... was too busy stuffing her face with fresh roasted venison to be paying attention. Chris didn't seem bothered at all; she was frozen in place, her face telling me she was nothing but eager for what was next. A round of applause maybe? I desperately wanted to tell her there was no flashing sign to tell the live studio audience to laugh or clap, but... no, I just don't know anything anymore.

“Any questions?” She finally asked.

Susan spoke up without missing a beat, “From where precisely, did assemble all this paper?”

Chris and Susan locked gazes. Susan with an incriminating look that spelled out: 'I'm getting real tired of your bullshit' and Chris with the same expecting mug she has been maintaining all this time.

“Ahem...” Chris cleared her throat, politely covering her mouth with a wing. “How exactly did I come up with such brilliant plan you ask?”

“No, I-” Susan tried to interrupt with a deadpan voice getting more impatient by the second.

“A direct assault! What won’t be expected! Our enemies think we're on the ropes, on the run, we'll run headlong right at them! Warfare is half deception. We will apply our maximum force at their weakness, their blind spot, at the place they would least likely expect us.”

“And from where did you procure the paper, Chris?”

Susan still had a lid on it, but I've watched her long enough to know when all that steam is ready to boil over onto the stove-top. I kept switching my gaze between the two as they bickered back and forth, Rose's eyes switched back and forth as well, like the two of us were watching a tennis match. She offered me a torn hunk of her venison which I accepted with a curt thanks. We munched away together as we sat on the log watching the spectacle.

“The Marru river eventually ends,” Chris said as a matter of fact. “When it becomes Lake Anthren, it could take another week to travel around it to its south shore. This is a shortcut!”

“A 'shortcut' directing us straight into the maws of peril!”

“Time is short!” Chris declared with gusto. “The longer we spend along these boarder nations, the longer their agents of darkness have to descend upon us.”

“I comprehend full well the hostilities of these lands. Law upon law against our kind, compensation no doubt for still being under the yoke of this church and seeking no disputation for whom their loyalties lie with. However, you dare say your 'grand master plan' should have us gallivant past their front door?”

“Yes! We cross the lake in a single stroke!” Chris shouted throwing her wings above her head.

Rose's throat made a subtle gurgle as she stopped swallowing halfway, “Wait. What?”

No one waited, especially not Susan who pressed in further, craning her neck upwards trying to stare down the wyvern; angrier than before, if that was possible.

“Reckless. Far too reckless!”

“What would be reckless is failing to be bold!” Chris retorted back jovially.

I don't think Chris got that this was a debate, not a continuation of her sales pitch.

“I saw 'er when on patrol. I'd heard of it, but I never flew south far enough to see it for myself. A great big barge. Part of the Old Imperial Highway, still floating. It's huge! Ginormous! We sneak on, find a corner deep inside, no one would ever find us.”

There was a tinge of impatience in addition to Susan's anger now, “We are attempting to remain incognito and make our way through these forests for the precise reason that-”

“Which will not last forever! Least the incident with the farmers occur again.”

Susan stopped dead in her tracks and even retreated a bit, “That was an unfortunate accident... No precedents were set.”

Now I had to defend myself, “No one was expecting there to be two random farmers in the middle of nowhere arguing and ready to gut one another.”

I remember it well now, although I wish I could have forgotten. We had only left Domdracveria when we encountered two farmers with a cow. A prize cow at that and they each accused the other of stealing it. One saying it had wandered onto his land, so it was now his and the other saying that was a load of bull, it had his brand. The other retorting that he should have kept it better and then he accuses the other of being jealous and wanting to claim it for himself. I don't even know, we only stumbled into halfway.

“Either way...” I continued, “Those two ran like bats out of hell screaming 'monsters!' all the while. Chris isn't wrong to be worried

they could have ratted us out."

"Did someone say' boat'?" Rose said trying to interrupt.

She was quickly cut off by Susan, "Pharaoh, please, surely you must see there is too much risk and too little reward?"

"Both men with fouls hearts consumed with nothing but greed." Chris mused. "For a portion of the bounty, surely they would do just that. They even left the poor heifer behind."

"She was de-lish though." Rose said wistfully. "Hadn't had good red meat like that in under week- Hold up! You said something about-"

"Cease changing the subject, Chris!" Susan barked. "This hair-brained caper of yours is simply out of the question."

Chris' grand mater plan: I had to take an even closer look at it in order to wrap my head around it. The sheet looked like it was a bunch of smaller scraps of paper stitched crudely together. It was adorned with various streaks of blue, green, red and other colours of the rainbow. Thick and crudely drawn lines, glistening like wax in the dusk sun. Almost like crayons. My mind was more preoccupied with how she actually drew it all. You'd say a girl like her, a grown woman, could draw better than a six year old, but then again, she doesn't have opposable thumbs, let alone hands.

In the upper right corner was four stick figures: A brown, red, black and green one. The last three having odd features like ears and tails tacked on, so I guess the brown one was me. Those figures were surrounded by a sea of trees, but little brown lines with green chevrons sticking off of them. Next to it a big fat and sloppily filled in blue squiggle; most likely Marru river.

That blue line meandered until it reached a large blue blob: Lake Anthren. Floating on top of it was a large bowl; the barge if I had to guess, with the four of us standing on top of it. On the other side of the blue blob was a bunch of poorly drawn buildings. What was below that and to the left of them was some sort of series of carts drawn by a bunch of... dogs? No, those are probably supposed to be horses. Following the blue line, it became two black lines with brown ones connecting them like a ladder that finally led to an even larger blue blob, crowned with more poorly drawn buildings. The Southern Seas and the Free Ports.

"We shall use the enemy's own strengths against them! We shall stowaway on the Old Imperial Highway and ride straight to the coast!"

"If you wanted to cross the Lake, why sneak aboard the barge? Simply procure a smaller vessel." Susan asked.

"And who shall sell their vessel to monsters?" Chris said throwing the question back at her.

“Then we seize one.”

“What?” Chris screamed wide eyed in disbelief. “Steal? For one who loves law, how could you say such a thing?”

“I'm hearing boat. Did someone say boat?” Rose said off to the side trying to cut in.

“Pharaoh’s law is heaven and stars above the lowly laws of these lands. Laven's safety comes first, at any cost.”

“And what of the fishermen! The others! You would steal their livelihood! Living day to day, not a copper to their names, only their belongings and the catch every day to feed their family.”

“So, leave behind a few petty trinkets to compensate them... Did you not also claim they were the enemy? What bizarre thoughts have run amok in that thick skull of yours?”

“The just do not steal. Neither do they 'steal'!” Chris said, trying to make air quotes with her forearm talons. “A lone ship, once reported stolen, knowing we are there, we will not last long upon the waters before we are tracked, trailed and cornered.”

“You make too many assumptions, Chris.” Susan said. “Then we watch from a safe distance while Laven negotiates.”

Chris shook her head, “Impossible.”

“If you're so positive about such things... What exactly is it that you are hiding from us?”

Susan marched past Chris, who was too slow to stop the Anubis from getting her paws on the paper and swipe it down from the tree with her claws.

“Hey!” Chris protested, “I spent all the extra time I had on that!”

“Extra time?” Susan said, turning her head slowly toward her.

“Huh? What?” Chris said, playing innocent now.

Susan stood there stunned for a few seconds, trying to process something, but not before Chris leapt back into gear. It didn't help much when she tried to rip the paper away from Susan, only managing to snag away a large chunk, but not all of it. It was far too late when Susan dodged the second swipe and happened to look down at what was on the reverse side of the paper. A crude sketch, a caricature with symbols, written language that was beyond me. If anything, I'd say it looked like the ugly love child between old Nordic Runes and Sanskrit. It wasn't the alphabet, that's all I know, even if somehow it sounded out what was exactly English.

“Chris...” Susan said, darkness covering her eyes as she quickly read the paper over. “What is this?”

“Well...”

“When exactly were you planning to tell us of this?”

“About right after the part you interrupted me at?”

“Do you think this is a game? Theater?” Susan exploded.

“Not anymore. You ruined the buildup.” Chris said, her mood having finally soured at last. “I was going to get to that after the tension had built up enough.”

“Now is not the time for your games!”

Odd, I seem to remember a certain someone trying to put on an act when I first met her too. Either way, I had to step in again and push them apart, putting myself between them.

“No fighting!” I said, commanding them both. “What do we have here?”

Susan took a few deep breaths and calmed herself, returning to her neutral state. She then turned it over and held it up so I could see it clearly. Plain as day: it was a portrait, a portrait of me. There was no denying it, it had all the hallmarks of a wanted poster.

“Aw hell.” I spat. “A wanted notice?”

No wonder Chris seems so dead set against any other idea than her own. If I walk alone into any town right now, I'd be strung up in less than a minute. If I'm seen with the girls, it would cause a panic and eventually the same thing when a small army of bounty hunters dog-pile us.

“Correct,” Susan nodded. “Laven.” She said, reading it out for me. “Wanted for the crimes of: blasphemy, conspiracy, treason...” She opened her mouth to say something else, but stopped herself then continued. “Alive: four hundred crowns. Dead: three hundred crowns.”

What a relief to be worth more alive than dead. Why she stopped near the end still gnawed at me though.

“What was that last bit?” I asked.

The last bit on the very bottom looked scribbled in. Rather hastily at that. My curiosity wouldn't let it slide.

“I do not know what you speak of.” Susan said suspiciously coy.

Leering over Susan's shoulder from behind, Chris spied down on the paper. “Cattle Rustling.”

“God dammit.” I sighed.

“Worth it!” Rose shouted from the sidelines.

“This is worse than I thought...” I grumbled.

“And this is where you procured all this paper on such short notice?” Susan asked gravely.

“Yup.” Chris said. “I found em everywhere in towns and villages all 'round. Ah. And before you get yourself in a tiffy, the Dark Wing Drake swoops from up high and from the shadows to strike at the heart of evil in the name of Justice! I was not discovered!”

She said with a posed look, exaggerated as always, her voice a

forced baritone.

“Anyways... This is bad and bad news travels fast. I say we go with Chris' plan.”

“Pharaoh... Laven, surely you must realize it is not-”

“No. We'll have to risk it. If we meander through the forest and take the long route, more people are gonna see these. Even if Chris pilfered them from everywhere in a fifty kilometre area... It wont last long and they'll know we're close. We'll have every sell sword in the area breathing down our necks. There's no way we're gonna get anywhere... Right Rose?”

I said turning my head incredulously toward Rose who taking a deep breath and with a talon raised as thought she were about to make the case that would be a fantastic thing quickly deflated and silently pouted instead.

“Onward!” Chris bellowed. “We travel to port, brazenly! Defy the agents of darkness and leave their agents chasing our dust clouds and shadows!”

“So pilfering a ship for our own purposes is suddenly not acceptable?” Susan protested. “And being stowaways is?”

“Stealing property of innocents, however misguided, is simply unacceptable!” Chris loudly declared. “The Empire is an agent of darkness! The enemy. It is war. Besides, it's the Imperial Highway. The only ones who have got the power to stop it is the Emperor's court. Once we're on, it wont stop, slow down or take a detour. Perfect for forcing our way south. We abuse the weakness and leap off when they realize and it's too late. Only if they wanna hold up tens of thousand tons worth of stuff to do so. For all the hunger and greed in the Empire... It won’t happen!”

Rose seemed uncharacteristically reserved and Susan didn't look any happier. I'd say the Anubis definitely looked worried more than anything. I suppose I had to say something.

“Don't worry, Susan. It's just a cargo barge. A very large cargo barge What could go wrong?”

***

“How the fuck did everything go wrong!” I growled.

“Did I not warn you, Laven?” Susan hissed my ear.

We took refuge behind a support beam as yet another patrol passed by. We had left a whole group of them in our dust, but they were still crawling all over the place. They were concentrated around the stairways as well. It was virtually impossible to sneak by unless they got bored and tried venturing out. If I had to take a guess, we were still another four three floors below the top deck and freedom. There had to be a lifeboat or something up there we could use to get off this boat. That was the only hope that kept us going.

“Well, sorry for a small army not being high up on my list of expected run ins.”

“That is hardly an excuse.”

“It isn't. I'm pretty sure it's just a freak accident too.”

“And what possesses you to consider that?”

“I'm going to give them all a little credit. They seem well equipped, learned and trained, but don't seem very professional. They're not organized at all and if they claim they are, it would be an insult to the idea of organization. I've been thinking-”

“Have you now? You should have done so back at the camp.” Susan said with a snarky tone.

“I've been thinking.” I growled as I repeated myself. “That they are not here as some sort of trap. More like we ran into them and now they don't know what to do. We would have been cornered and caught by now if that wasn't the case. If we just-”

I had to stop short and pull Susan aside with me as yet another patrol strolled past. There had to be dozens of these mercenaries around. Maybe just short of a hundred in total if they're spread out evenly across the entire barge. This one group didn't go around the corner though, they stopped when they met up with another patrol I hadn't seen yet. They spoke loudly and were close enough to eavesdrop on.

“What's the situation on the lower decks. Have you found them?” An armored man from the new patrol asked.

A roguish looking man with a bow slung over his shoulders gave his report, “No. Heard they might have snuck up to this level by now. Still trying to dig out the team at cargo room B too. You?”

“Word is going around that the monster running amok on the top deck is actually the Thorn Knight.”

“You're pulling my leg.” The rogue's partner said in disbelief.

“Swear on me mum's grave. Lizard type. Salamander. Long red hair in a ponytail... Looks just like her too.”

“She is her,” said the armoured man's friend solemnly. “I'd recognize that face and tail fire anywhere. Used to be stationed in Elbrook Keep a couple years back. I couldn't ever forget.”

“Well, did they get 'er?”

“Get her?” The armored man laughed. “There's already a pile waist high of guys who've tried. She doesn't look like she's going anywhere though. Probably waiting on the others to join her.”

“And that's why we're here. Going to regroup and try pinning her down. Overwhelm her maybe if we get lucky. What we need you to do is to find that man.”

The armored man stressed it if his partner wasn't already clear enough, “We get him, we're in the clear.”

“How you figure?”

“Idiot, don't you read the guide? He's probably her mate.”

“Mate? The Thorn Knight's? You want us to try taking on the guy that got the Thorn Knight?”

“Just a filthy heathen in the end. He's only human too. Unless you're volunteering to go back on deck?”

The two mercenaries shook their heads violently.

“Thought so... Now unless you want to one of the ones after that giant wyvern as well: find the other ones. Now!”

“What 'bout the wolf with 'im? They say she collapsed the whole-”

“I said now!”

With their little meeting concluded, I had to quickly pull back away from the corner as they turned around and headed back in our direction. There was no way to take cover this time and while I dreaded the thought, we'd have to duck out of the hallways and into one of the storerooms. They'd be a dead end at best, a deathtrap at the worst. With Susan still a tow, I yanked her without a word and slipped inside the closest doorway.

Inside was a collection of white sheets suspended in the air, all draped over an array of objects. If I hazarded a guess: statues. When you build a barge this big, I guess you don't discriminate what you send across it and you send them over in bulk. I had to wonder though, just what the hell were they moving and why have an army of mercenaries to guard it? Statues is the last thing I'd expect to move north the south. I don't remember hearing about any major city centres this far north. Even that port back there was pretty small. Nothing but a glorified stockyard and some houses.

I didn't have the time to contemplate it before I noticed Susan's ears twitch and then heard the footsteps got closer. We were going to need a place to hide. Right away. Luckily the perfect plan popped into my head. With Susan still in tow, I leapt up onto an empty stand, large enough for the both of us to stand on. With my free hand, I grabbed one of the spares white sheets and threw it over the two of us.

“Laven? What are you-?”

“Not now, stay still and stay close.”

I wrapped my arms around Susan and pulled her head down into my chest and took a deep breath so I could stay absolutely still. Susan squirmed and protested for a second, but when I held on tight and pulled her even closer she eventually went absolutely still as well. She rested her paws on my chest as she clenched and balled up the fabric of my shirt as she held on tight, blushing all the while. I could feel the heat radiate off her body, her smooth skin pressing up against me as her thighs slipped between my legs, but this wasn't the time for

that. I was in complete control this time, this was a matter of life or death, not pride and restraint. At the very last moment, Susan realized her bushy tail was still poking out from under the sheet and quickly pulled it in and held it tightly against her chest.

The clatter of boots slowly patrolling out in the hallway came to a stop outside the room and the two of us tensed up. My breaths were shallow, not that I had much choice. In order to breath with what little room we had, Susan and I had to take turns on inhaling and exhaling so we were not competing for room. The seconds felt like minutes until the clatter of boots went along their merry way. Susan and I both collapsed on each other, propping one another up. All the air in our lungs, along with the tension, leaving our bodies at once.

"That was not clever. That was merely fortunate." She said chastising me

"Well, it worked."

"Irregardless, release me at once before-"

It was dark under the sheet, but even I could feel Susan's ears twitch once again. What? Again? Don't tell me they're having second thoughts about what they saw? We both panicked a little and drew even closer together, hoping for a better performance than last time. It didn't go exactly as planned. Susan's busy tail, the very tip of it, was brushing up against the tip of my nose. A few stray whiskers tickling it, causing my upper lip to twitch involuntarily. My heart sunk, I felt a sneeze coming on and Susan knew it too, her eyes went wide with fright.

My hands were struck at my sides and there was no way I could bring them up without disturbing the sheet noticeably. Luckily Susan was cool under pressure and a paw clutched at my chest reached up and pinched my nose shut. It didn't help that the fur and whiskers of her paw weren't much better than her tail, but there was no way I was going to sneeze now. I had trouble breathing and had to hold my breath, but the footsteps once again waltz past, this time without stopping. When Susan's ears stopped twitching with each footfall, she let go and I took in a huge gulp of air.

"Okay... We good?" I asked.

"No." She replied bluntly. "I hear more than before."

"You don't think they're just getting reinforcements before they rush in?"

"No. They speak of someone else other than us. Quickly now, take on a different less... embarrassing position." She said blushing and radiating off even more heat.

In the brief moment we had, we turned our backs to each other, but the sudden trotting of footsteps near the entryway that even I could hear caused us to nearly slam back into each other. My hands that

were behind my back caught onto something. Something soft that my fingers sank into it. Just as quickly as the sensation reached my brain, it just as quickly went rigid as I felt Susan tense up like a bow. She stifled a yelp and craned her neck at me.

"Laven! Cease and desist at once!" She hissed at me in a whisper.

"Not my fault, I didn't mean to!" I hissed back.

"S-stop squeezing!"

"Then stop backing up into 'em! You're gonna knock me off. Ack, don't push back with your tail either!"

"Then stop molesting me! Now is not the time."

"Then stop pushing me! I don't have anything else to grab onto!"

We'd be caught this time for sure, but the footsteps rushed past without paying even a moment of attention to the sheet fluttering for no reason. By the time we calmed down, they were long gone. We both breathed a sigh of relief, but Susan quickly remembered her anger. She sulked, turned to the side. Susan stuck her hips out in the opposite direction away from my wandering hands and jut her elbow out into my side to keep me away.

"Laven, you lecher! I cannot believe you... Even during such a crisis..."

"That wasn't what I planned on doing! Well, I will admit it wasn't half bad but-" I said while blushing and clenching my hands and feeling the residual warmth of- "No no no, not planned at all!"

I fell backwards as Susan's elbow nearly crowded me out completely. So there I was, squatting down, wavering back and forth, almost falling off the small stand completely. I was waving my hands as though trying to swim through the air and back into balance. I finally found the perfect spot for my arms to balance me. My arms crossed in front of me, one on my bicep the other free hand found Susan's bushy tail. She yelped and cursed under her breath, but all things considered, she had to realize she couldn't complain; for reasons she brought up and the nature of our present circumstances. I was straining and draining all the strength out of my abdomen fast by trying to stay balance and still. The burning sensation would soon wrack me with pain for sure.

"She ran that way! Get her!" A woman's voice echoed through the hallways and into our room.

Susan and I tensed up. Even though we were still struggling to get into a position where we weren't smothering each other, we managed stood stock-still for just a moment. A rumbling of footsteps soon echoed into the room, as well as the rattling of armor, weapons and even the occasional roar of wind and explosion of fire and magic.

Thunderous footsteps burst into the room and the sound of chisels on wood tore up the floorboards as the intruder came to a screeching halt. The figure let out a gasp of surprise, no doubt after seeing this was a dead end and soon after the plethora of sounds from her pursuers converged at the entry way.

“We got you now!” Yelled one.

“'Arms' above you head and come quietly. We'll be merciful” Commanded another.

The person they were talking; I could hear her breathing heavily, but she said nothing in return. Still trying to catch her breath, she took a few quick sniffs through her nose. There was a brief moment where she didn't breathe at all, but then I heard... laughter?

“Fu fu fu fu.” She chortled.

Hold up, I know that laugh.

“Ha ha ha ha!” She burst laughing.

No doubt about it, that's Chris.

“You're trapped monster!” Shouted another. “You ran right into it.”

“Trapped?” Chris said half laughing. “You are gravely mistaken. Do not be so presumptuous! I am not trapped. It is you who have been led into a trap.”

There was a mixture of confusion and bemusement from a little over a dozen voices at the entrance of the room. They weren't buying her bluff and were laughing it off. I heard the rattle of steel, drawing of bow strings and the unmistakable shimmer and crackle of magic.

“Hey! Don't turn your back on us! Give it up!”

I heard Chris' footsteps get closer and closer until I could make out her large silhouette from underneath the sheet. Her wing spans spreading out as she turned around to face the mercenaries at the entryway. She reached out with her wings. Chris' talons cut into the sheet and with a deep hissing breath that rushed in through her nose, she filled her lungs.

“Awaken, my master!” She bellowed in her deep forced baritone.

Chris violently pulled the sheet off both Susan and I. Now exposed, I could see the large gathering of armed, armored and robed mercenaries. Chris had squat down, so that even as tall as she is, she didn't block my view of all the weapons and spells pointed in our direction. Their faces however, were frozen in surprise. All the weapons arrayed before us dropped a little for a brief moment and the whole spectacle lasted only for a few seconds, but it felt like minutes, Susan and I were still frozen stiff. We hadn't even flinched or budged from how we were trying desperately to hide, and successfully mind you, from before.

There was only one thought going through my head which then escaped my lips, “Goddammit, Chris.”

Chapter 52

Trapped in a small space and our only exit blocked by a whole squadron of mercenaries. A company of men and women, each one distinct and different from the next and every one a tested warrior. My sense of impending dread held together even with contrast of the shocked expressions on their faces. For just a brief moment that illustrious impression that they had cobbled together was suspended. If I wasn't so embarrassed, maybe I'd think they were scared in stead of simply shocked. That might just be my mind going screwy though. My body was wracked with pain from being in such an improbably and impracticable position. Any trivial distraction would do right now. I really wish the walls were something other than a plain old boring brown right about now. Some stains on the ceiling would do too.

A little chaos didn't slow down Chris. I'm not sure if she's just making things up on the fly, or she had this all planned out. That was just the kind of mystery that surrounded her. Was it all just a show to her, or did she just want everyone to think she was a fool? Either way, everything seemed to be going according to one person's plan. That would be Chris'.

What worth did that plan have? I don't know. The three of us were exposed, out of cover, it seemed like a successful plan with a terrible goal mind. But it was Chris that made the first move. Before their archers could notch their arrows, Chris threw up her right wing, covering herself like a cloak. Her large frame covering us as well she stood up. When the first volley of arrows came flying toward us, I could hear a sound like steel on bone, but the bone did not give or break. The arrowheads collided with Chris' wing and deflected harmlessly off her dragon scales.

“Don't just stand there and shoot, you idiots!” Shouted an armored woman in the front. “Close in!”

Probably the best move, those arrows even at point blank didn't seem to pack enough punch, but a heavy crushing blow or the spells being channeled by the casters behind them might. And the warriors advanced, shields up and weapons out to either buy them time or rush in to claim victory for themselves. I had my doubts it was a good decision on their part.

Chris pulled back her wing and stepped up into the charge, right into the path of the front runner, a lithe woman encased in plate armor with a halberd's spear point held low at the floor. She gave out a brave battle cry, but was met instead by a powerful leg ending in talons each a small blade in their own right. I think she might have misjudged the kind of range a girl as tall as Chris has. A lazy boot to the chest was all Chris needed to do in order for her to be sent flying off her feet

and backwards into a comrade. Sending them both tumbling to the floor.

Balancing perfectly on her left leg, Chris sweeps her right leg upward. Her talons colliding with another warrior who thought he could flank and tackle her. The large wooden kite shield was splintered to pieces on impact and the man behind it came to a sudden stop out of terror. A quick follow through by rotating on her one leg had her tail came crashing in from the side. It swiped the man out-of-the-way with ease, sending him crashing into one of the covered statues. Dust and chunks of greyish-white marble to exploded from the wreckage.

Another man with a rapier in one hand and a whip in the other skillfully wrapped the leather around her right ankle, but when he tugged Chris didn't lose her balance, she didn't even budge. Chris brought her leg down suddenly with a grunt of effort and along with it the poor bastard who went teeth first into the floor and his whip torn from his hand. The other five warriors stopped in their tracks. Their morale to continue their valiant charge had been snapped in half like a twig. They fanned out and surrounded us instead, no longer eager to rush headlong toward the wyvern that stood almost a full two heads taller than any of them.

“Is this the best you can offer?” Chris said taunting them. “Where did all your bravado go?”

That first woman and her friend untangled themselves and although still dazed, they rose to their feet. The man thrown into the statue did the same, wavering from being punch drunk. The pretty boy duelist, now a little less pretty with a few missing and broken teeth, was still rolling on the floor in pain. Chris watched them all with tepid anticipation, slightly disappointed they had stopped. Her mood was soured even more when a stray arrow slammed off her left shoulder. The arrowhead blunted upon impact and the shaft cracking afterward. It would have done better hitting a solid brick wall. It left nothing but a scuff; a wound no more serious than a paper cut.

It was a nice effort on their part. You might assume from the way Chris is dressed the she is vulnerable, but her skin was armour. She didn't need to laden herself with plate additional plates. I'm also certain that she doesn't like arrows much at all. Seems like every time she gives a speech or is about to an arrow comes out of nowhere and strikes her. She doesn't have fists to clench, but her talons did begin tearing up the wooden floor boards.

“Magic missile barrage! Fire now!” Shouted the female warrior just now separating herself from the other warrior.

The wands and staffs belonging to the trio of casters in the back glowed a purplish-white. Their incantations had gathered enough magical energies to send out a barrage of pointed and potent missiles.

They hissed like fireworks as they ripped through the air and arched on a direct trajectory toward Chris, but when they exploded, they did so without making contact with their intended target. They slammed into an invisible barrier. I heard a jingle of chains beside me, a golden scale swaying back and forth atop of gold staff. Susan's stomach tattoos were glowing white. Doing what they every time she channels her powers.

I felt vindicated in assuming these people were unorganized. Individually they seemed quite competent, but they're only human after all. Their coordination is a mess. Going in one by one and failing to take in all possible variables. They outnumbered us, but that advantage only mattered when it was used effectively because each girl individually was so much more powerful than any one of these mercenaries.

"We shall discuss your brash actions later. For now, we'll see Laven to safety." Susan said dropping off the stand and taking position next to Chris.

"Then watch yourself, princess. You might chip a claw or get a scrape," Chris taunted.

"We'll also discuss how to address other politely."

"Need that long to think of a comeback?"

Chris looked down at Susan with a wry smile, Susan didn't flinch or return the playful jab at all. Her paws did wrap tighter around her staff as she prepared herself for when the mercenaries finished rallying.

"Be silent and concentrate," She finally growled in response.

I wasn't going to be doing the two of them any favors by remaining on the stand, so I leapt down as well and stood behind the two. There had to be a way I could be of help, but I also understood there wasn't much I could do. I didn't want to become pin cushion for arrows or get held down and taken hostage... again. There was only really one thing I could do.

Bluff.

I straightened out my back, puffed out my chest and crossed my arms in front of my chest. I threw a mean look at those watching the three of us carefully and even though my heart sunk and jumped with each pair of killer eyes I met, I kept my cool by realizing they were probably just as terrified, if not more, than I was.

"Surrender now, heathen incubus!" A young priest in factory default church robes and a friar haircut.

Seriously, do they mass produce these guys? And is the church in on this? The rest of his companions don't seem the pious type. More like the wanting to be paid type. And there was that word again: Incubus. A heathen I can understand, but why throw around the

incubus bit? A man so overcome with demonic energy that something inside him... changes. Well, I know for certain after the run in with the hunk of black magic that certainly isn't the case.

"Surrender? I don't think so," I said. "How about I make you an offer? A ten second head start to get out of our way. We're leaving and we don't need to take you out to do so. If that has to happen, it will be up to you."

"This is not a negotiation, pal." Said a gruff voice from underneath a suit of armor.

"I don't really care if you're a nice guy," A vulgar looking rogue said. "I just know there's a bonus on every head that tries to pull a heist here today. Should have thought that part through before, if you weren't ready to tangle."

Pull a heist? What is he talking about? It does answer one question though. They most certainly are not here for us or for the bounty on me. They hadn't even called me out by name. But now I'm left wondering what so many mercenaries are being paid to protect.

"Greed!" Chris bellowed. "Greed!" She screamed nearly spitting the second time. "I should have known. I didn't want to believe it, but to think so many would do battle with for such a feeble cause."

And there Chris goes. Throwing around her wings, hamming it up like a freshman drama student. Painfully calculated and stiff articulations of her each and every word.

"Words fail, so now I will show you that it is JUSTICE that will prevail!"

Susan and I both tried to stop her, but it seems negotiations have died. Chris launched into the air by kicking off with her powerful legs, soared with the help of her wings and came crashing down back onto the deck with a flying kick. The mercenaries had to scatter to avoid being obliterated just like the wood panels underneath Chris' talons. But it had done its job, their formation was cut to ribbons with just one charge from the wyvern.

Even if she couldn't fly, the reach this girl had was frightening. Her tail was long and muscular; it acted like a weapon all on its own. It had more than enough strength that a quick flick could sweep someone or send them flying backwards. And those powerful legs ending in those talons, I watched as one of the warriors going in for a counter-attack had his sword caught in them, Chris clenching down hard. The steel of the sword bent and warped, eventually the sword breaking off at the tang, leaving the poor sap standing there with nothing but a hilt before her tail came whipping in from the side and sent him flying into some crates.

Her wings were like a pair of shields, the flexible leather membrane absorbing blows and I'm sure her arms couldn't be made of

flesh and bone from the beating they take when she fends off attacks. Her fighting skills were on a different level. Not a higher level then Rose, but somewhere tangential to it. A different kind of class. She seemed disciplined, precise and calculating. All the times she ran her mouth seemed like a distraction. If you listen to her, you'd think she was a fool. When you watch her, you definitely cannot disagree she isn't a warrior, a warrior of justice like she says. Even if her notion of justice is complex and exists only inside her head.

Chris had entered the fray like a bowling ball and the mercenaries sent flying in each direction like pins. That was where Susan slipped in to hold the rear. All eyes were on Chris and Susan, they couldn't afford to look away. When one shady looking thief lady broke through and made a run for the Anubis, she swung her gold staff around and caught the thin short blades of the rogue and pushed her aside. When she was thrown off her balance, Susan brought down the heavy golden scales which jingled and then jangled off the girl's head with a crack.

Paws radiant with her own special brand of divine energies. She could easily turn away any spell she could throw her paw in the way of. A channeled fire ball from one of the robed mercenaries, deflected after hitting an invisible wall Susan had thrown up in front of herself. You could make it out for just a second, a transparent geometric shape in the shadow of the fire's light. The fireball was sent into nearby statue, scatting on impact after turning the white sheet to ash instantly. With a snap of her digits she sends that energy out like a telekinetic blast, an invisible hand causing a sound like a thunderclap, the robed man in her sights is tossed backwards as if hit by a sledgehammer in the chest.

Susan isn't a warrior, but she had the strongest sense of duty and is clever, practical. Could she hold off all these mercenaries like Chris was going right now? No, I doubt it. But she can certainly help mop up. That just leaves me, standing in the back watching the mayhem unfold. Standing there wishing I could do something. Anything. That's when I spot the priest from before speaking into his rosary beads and waving his hands over the fallen and injured around the room. I watch as those fallen convulse, then pull themselves off the ground, shake-off and then stagger back into the fight.

If that's their angle... A fight of attrition... Okay, there's something other than bluffing I can do.

I can fight dirty.

He's off to the side, silent, pretty much a spectator like myself. So that's why I feel emboldened to storm over, swallow any misgivings, throw my shoulder back and let fly my knuckles into the side of her face. It's a cheap shot, I know that much, but I'm not going to stand

back and do nothing while you heal those trying to kill my companions like that. A cheap shot for sure, a veritable sucker punch, but after hitting the ground and the way he looked up at me, you'd think I had done something completely alien.

Another one of the warriors was tossed off to the side by Chris rampage. Like Pop-Eye after downing a can of spinach, laughing heartily all the time. The warrior tries to drag himself to his feet.

"Brother Thomas! Brother-" He shouts, then almost swallows his tongue when he looks over at the two of us.

Yeah, I'm definitely looking like the bad guy right now. Standing over an unarmed man of the cloth with my fists clenched. No doubt breathing heavily with a nasty villainous expression on my face.

"You!" He hisses, as though I had just mugged his own mother. "Leave him alone! Fight like a man you bottom feeding maggot!"

Such harsh words. Probably justified. Brother Thomas tries to rise to his feet, chanting away again, so I feel obliged to kick him in the ribs. He could have just stayed down, but no. His friend's face contorts in anger and the friar slumps back down on the floor, clutching his side, moaning and coughing uncontrollably.

"Hey! I said fight ME you sack of worthless shit!" The warrior spat.

"What? Why? You'll notice we're winning now?" I calmly replied.

Every mercenary being put down now was staying down. One, two, three, their causality rate was climbing fast. I wasn't going to be distracted by a taunt. It flies in the face of the Geneva convention, but I'm feeling a bit like the underdog and the insurgent right now, so I give the priest another kick to the side for good measure. If I'm already a heathen, blasphemy and a traitor, may as well add war criminal to that list. Polish it a little.

And soon they were forced to fall back beaten to the entry way. A tactical victory for us, but I fear the strategic victory had been ripped out from under us. We were still trapped and they knew it and although battered, they were not broken. As strong as Chris and Susan were, back to back and in tempo with one another, there was no way to break through the door.

"Reinforcements will be here soon. Give up and come out peacefully with your arms above your heads." Commanded the lead female warrior, breathing heavily.

All that fighting for nothing, huh? A real bitter pill to swallow. Venting by kicking this priest while he's down probably wouldn't help either. I felt my spirit slipping, but one person had a firm grip on it still. Chris was laughing heartily.

“Fu fu fu~ Have you given up so easily? Is that all the strength of your greed has? Your feeble sense of justice?”

Chris seems to have had her fun and with that fun at its end, her hearty laughter ends. Her wings rest upon at her hips, her chest puffs out and she takes a deep breath. Neither I, nor the mercenaries, needed any other hint. The men and women crowded at the door started moving immediately, but not in retreat. They fell into formation instead. Almost as though it were drilled into them. They started forming a shield wall. They put together so quickly and efficiently, it was as though their previous piss-poor cooperation had been a lie. I suppose it was dog eat dog before, now was not the time for one-upmanship.

They scrambled into position, but Chris then deliberately and slowly turned to one side, toward the wall on her right. Gurgling like she was coughing up phlegm in the back of her throat, she spat up a large fireball slammed into the side of the supply room with a deafening explosion. Splinters of wood and dust were thrown everywhere, but what had opened, was another exit into another unguarded supply room.

Once I looked up after shielding my eyes, there was only one thought going through my head: 'Why the hell didn't I think of that?'

“Away!” Chris shouted and took off running through the exit.

Susan and I were stunned for a couple seconds longer, but we soon followed. The mercenaries at the door were caught flatfooted and left in the dust. This other store room had an exit facing the opposite direction, there was no way to cut us off. They'd be far too slow to surround us if they were all converging on that other exit. We'd be long gone and up another level or two before they could even hope to get back on our heels. This was out best chance, maybe our only opportunity to break through the blockade and make it topside and meet up with Rose who is waiting. The mercenaries seemed to have gambled everything and lost.

...That wasn't Chris' plan all along, was it? I'll ask her later when we get to safety.

Right now, the best thing to do would be keep my mind in moment as the three of us bolt through the abandoned hallways of the ship, desperately making our way toward the stairs leading up toward the higher decks. Even though we could not hear any pursuers, they would eventually regroup and give chase. Maybe we had bought a little less than a minute before someone takes charge, starts barking new orders and they gather their wits to brave pursuit. While we were on the run again there were a couple things I couldn't help but ask.

I caught up with Chris and asked her directly, “Who the hell are these guys anyways?”

“Silver Banner Guildies.” She responded.

Seems like we are getting somewhere now.

“A mercenary guild?”

“Not just any guild. Silver Banner is part of a bigger project by the Empire. Humanity's exploration and reclamation outfit.”

“Heh, real clever,” I chuckled.

“Excuse me?” Susan asked from behind.

“What? You guys not invent anagrams yet?”

We came to a stairwell at last and stopped since they were only wide enough to go up one at a time. I stole a glance and Susan and Chris who both gave me puzzled looks.

“Okay, never mind, just go!”

In case there was some sort of ambush the thick skinned Chris went first and Susan as her backup in the middle, which left me carrying the rear. The stairs were steep and at the top the design of the hallways changed radically. The bare utilitarian wooden walls were now ever so slightly ornate. As though we had finally emerged from the cargo holds to the passenger quarters.

“Anyways, just what are these guys up to?”

Chris explained calmly for once, “Silver Banners are often on the frontiers. Exploring and spelunking. Looking for lost treasures. Even serving as mercenaries where there isn't a solid law.”

I guess even the gravity of the situation was getting to her. She was speaking clearly without a hint of delusion.

“Rose and I came from the frontier and I hadn't heard of them.”

“Relics from the previous war,” Susan responded. “Do you not remember? The calamity that befell mankind nearly a millennium ago. My desert, a deathtrap. Further north, woodland and tundra. No treasures nor glory to be won.”

“Humanity stretched far and wide across the world,” Chris continued. “There are lots of old ruins. A lot of forgotten secrets and treasures. Old traps, magics and monsters now calling them home. People fight over who has the rights to them too. So they fight each other pretty often too. Not to the death though.”

“Cozenage,” Susan said. “Mock combat so that no member is truly hurt.”

“Right.” Chris nodded. “They form little cliques, but they all work under the same banner.”

“That doesn't explain why they're here. This ain't the frontier.”

“They work for money. You pay em enough and they'll do it. Not the church or any state. But for clearing out demon realms or any other dirty business... So long as it pays.”

I could taste the vitriol in Chris' voice as she spoke. I think it would be safe for me to say she abhors the idea of fighting for money. But she was getting along so well with Rose who was a mercenary herself... Then again, Rose didn't care about money at all. She just lived for the fights her contracts brought. Maybe that's why those two happened to hit it off so well?

I'm feeling a bit better with an improved answers to questions ratio. One of the mercenaries said something about a heist. They're being paid to guard the ship while it's in transit. But guard what? a bunch of high art? They didn't seem too worried while it was pulverized. I didn't have the time to make assumptions on gut feelings, the three of us were still on the run. We climbed up another steep flight of stairs, but our luck seemed to hit a dry spell. Chris came to a sudden stop at a three way intersection. Left, right or backward and down.

"Chris?" Susan asked with a tinge of worry in her voice.

"I ran about before, but I don't remember this place. There should be another set of stairs up to the top deck."

"Blow a hole in the roof then." I suggested.

"Could bring down the roof and whatever is on top. Could block the whole hallway, better or for worse."

A wrong turn could put us right back into the path of our pursuers who were probably searching desperately for us. It would almost all of them this time and I'm not sure we could handle it this time. And the more time we spent staring and wondering, the worse it got.

"Left." I said.

"Laven?" Susan said, looking skeptical.

"Are you sure, master?" Chris said, also doubting me.

"My luck has been shitty all day. Odds are in my favor right now."

The two girls went silent. It was both stupid and brilliant at the same time and neither had a better option.

"Left! Go!" I ordered.

Chris and Susan ran off to the left and I followed after them. For a few seconds until I felt something smash into my right. I had watched the girls cross an intersection without a problem, but I felt like I had been hit by a runaway truck. Was it fatal? No, whatever hit me also hit the floor as hard as I did. For a brief moment, our bodies were tangled together like two cartoon characters, suspended in the air before we remembered there was gravity by looking down. I groaned in pain, and so did the other guy. 'Odds are in my favor', huh? Fucking figures.

I rolled away from the crash site and looked up to see the guy who blindsided me, at least part of him. He was draped in a green

cloak and I couldn't make out his face. Part of that was probably from what could turn out to be a concussion, but when my vision finally focused I discovered there was black wool covering his face. A mask. Someone who certainly didn't want to be discovered. Our eyes met, but it was he who went tense. His instincts were sharp and he soon picked himself up and started running again, continuing on his way as though we had never hit at all. I was still groggy and trying to get back up, if he wanted to shank me or take my hostage, he could have done so easily. What the hell is up with him?

"Master!" Chris screamed.

The wyvern had turned around and was rushing back toward me and offered a shoulder so I could help myself up. My knees shook for a moment, but I still had enough adrenaline to continue running.

"Laven, what was that?" Susan said, also worried.

"Don't know," is all I could say. "Someone did a hit and run. Mostly running. I'm fine though. I'm not hurt... We need to keep going."

There wasn't any time to be waiting around. I'd put that on my tab for later, along with the self loathing and despair if this turns into a dead end. I swear... If that happens, I'm going to choke slam Lady Luck for being a cunt.

I had to borrow Chris' shoulder for a bit, but I eventually got back to my feet and we returned to our all out sprint soon enough. Right around a corner and at the end of the hallway, another set of stairs. What had to be the last set of stairs we'd need to reach the top deck. I was delighted and awash with vindication, until my eyes moved downward to the mountain of steel in the shape of a man waiting patiently at the foot of the steps.

Who knew you could stack steel that high? Let alone that anyone forging armor that thick. I didn't even want to begin thinking how strong the man underneath it would have to be. There was no way I was going to delude myself into thinking it was just another statue someone left in the middle of a hallway for no reason.

"Welcome, heathens. To deliverance," The mountain of steel spoke, his voice echoing inside his own armor; like a machine.

Yup, glad I held off deluding myself for once. I need to avoid the crushing feel of disappointment for a bit. For my health.

"You face The Rampart. One of the Almighty's chosen. By his will, you shall not pass," He spoke elegantly and with grace.

He had an aura around him, almost like a halo round his head. Silver polished armor that was embellished with gold trimming in ornate designs. Like runes, winding lines of dialogue that looked like scriptures. That was the impression he gave to me. There wasn't a sword in his hand, no weapon on his back or one at his hip. Just a shield. A very large round shield strapped to his right arm. Unlike his

silver armor; it was wooden and looked dirty, poor and undignified. The contrast was stunning and profound.

If the man had anything else to say, Susan wasn't going to hear it. It wasn't Susan who usually leapt in first, but she was the most practical of all us, she wasn't going to let this mountain blather and hold us up when time was in short supply. With a swish of her staff and a snap of her digits, an invisible force lashed out toward the knight, but all the man had to do was raise his old wooden shield. It was only for a moment, and I'd have to swear on it instead of proving it, but a glow with the same white aura as the man, enshrouded the shield for a moment. There was the sound of a heavy knock on wood, the shield flinching backward slightly in the firm man's grip and then a slamming force cracking the floor halfway between us.

Susan didn't follow up, her stoic expression turned into a frown and her eyes widened, twitching and scanning the man over. She was... searching. Looking for an answer to something she didn't understand. Whatever just happened didn't make sense to her and if something doesn't make sense to Susan, that worries me too.

“Your foul magics will have no effect on me, heathen dog. Judgement has waited patiently for you. While you run and hide, I heard the whispers from up high tell me you would arrive. You shall not reach your friend. And revenge will be had for each of my friends who listened to their own passions and not my Lord's words of warning.”

“Judgement?” Chris said darkly. “Judgement? Another Silver Banner telling me they know what justice is?”

“Judgement is the Almighty's domain, Monster. The Silver Banner merely the vessel which I deliver it from. As his words have told me.”

“A Silver Banner doesn't have a foot to stand on when lecturing me on justice!” Chris shouted.

Silver Banner. 'The bandits' back in Domdracveria... They were paid to be there, like mercenaries. Is there a connection? Is Chris connecting the wrong dots? I guess it doesn't matter right now if it's true, if she's making that connection... I know exactly where this anger is growing from. That's the only thought process going trough her head right now.

“Stand fast heathens. You shall not pass and the Lord's allies shall soon arrive. Then you will finally feel the calm embrace of the judgement that awaits your poor souls. You poor licentious and wrecked souls.”

“Your judgement! My justice! We'll find out which is stronger. Right here! Right now! Silver Bannerman!” Chris screamed out in challenge.

Chris broke free of our formation and sprinted headlong toward

the mountain of steel, yelling a battle cry all the while. The mountain slid her heavy boots into position to brace for the incoming blow. I heard Susan gasp beside me and I stole a quick glace to see her eyes wider than before. Wide with the shock of realization.

“That shield. Enchanted. Old magics.” She rattled off.

Magic shield. Enchanted. Susan's spell having no effect... No, that's not right. Her spell did have an effect, just not on the man. It was...

“Chris!” Susan shouted.

“Chris stop!” I shouted afterwards.

Susan had figured it out and after looking at her I did as well, but even my voice couldn't reach Chris now. She was bounding toward the massive suit of armor, the magic shield large enough to cover his entire torso and half his helmet just below the eyes. She'd try to break him with one kick, all her strength behind one blow and when she did...

“JUS-!” Chris began to scream out.

My heart sank. Chris' powerful leg swept back in preparation for the decisive blow. The knight braced himself and I saw the dull wooden shield shimmer with a subtle aura. Chris came within striking distance of her long reach, the steel mound didn't budge and simply raised his shield and prepared to block.

“-TICE! Low kick~”

It wasn't a roundhouse, it wasn't a straight kick or a forward boot, it was a simple arc, like the swinging of a pendulum. Under the shield, at a slight angle, between the knight's legs which were shoulder width apart. The flat top of Chris' large taloned foot collided with the steel armor with a deafening clang, as though her target were a soccer ball. Well, it certainly was a type of ball, that's for sure. The armored skirt rose upward with the blow, the knight's whole bulk frame lifted upward a bit, slightly off his feet. The metal at the sight of impact: bent. If there had a cup there, it did nothing. Susan and I both flinched and hissed gasps between our teeth. I could feel the sympathy pain all the way over here.

The glow in the shield faded away. A series of noises came from underneath the knight’s visor, gurgling and some high pitched. His knees buckled and his huge mass came crashing down on the floor. Landing on top of his shield which is body instinctively curled around for protection, almost in a fetal position. Well, the voice echoing out from behind that helm may sound like it, but he certainly isn't a machine. That much is for sure.

Chris stood over his body, taking in a breath and slowly exhaling. Susan and I cautiously approached, weary of the groaning and incapacitated heap of steel on the floor. The occasional sobbing and choking was jarring.

“Chris?” I tentatively said.

“Basics of close quarters confrontations!” Chris declared with the usual gusto. "Maximum force at your opponent’s weak spot for maximum effect.”

“This also about warfare being half deception?”

“Now you're learning” Chris said with a smile and a lifted talon on her forearm, like some kind of attempt at a thumbs up.

The three of us stood there for a few awkward seconds. It would have been silent, but the dignified shell of a man was making a ruckus on the ground next to us; rolling about and groaning. I don't know if Chris knew what was going on or not just now, a question for another time, but we needed to get going. Now. Luckily, we seemed to all have the idea at the same time. Chris and Susan took off up the stairs and I followed behind them, leaving the poor man to wallow in a new world of pain reserved only for him.

I looked up and saw the dark of night we had let shield us when we first slipped into the port and onto the ship had been replaced with the orange light of dawn. A welcoming sight along with the warmth of the spring sun. The confines of this barge's bowels were soon to be behind me. I'd once again enjoy the warm light of day and... snow?

The further I got up the stairs, the closer I got to the entrance, white particles began to flutter through the air. They dusted the steps in a layer of grey, but the back of my throat burned and when I took a breath through my nose, I smelled something burning. I choked and coughed, a haze of smoke lingering in the air amongst the dancing snow. Dancing snow that scalded my tongue when they swept into my mouth. No. It wasn't snow. It was... ash.

When I came out onto the deck, I saw Chris and Susan's backs, their tails hanging low. I looked out and saw... Devastation. It was the only word that could do the scene before me any justice. The orange glow wasn't the sun. It was fire. All around me was the smouldering wreckage of whatever had been on the top deck. Raging infernos flickering in the backdrafts from fresh winds carried by the lake. Billows of smoke being carried off by those very winds that lapped up against the surface of the lake. Among the debris and the piles of ash and dust, I saw the occasional mercenary. Face up, face down, buried, it didn't matter. There was a trail of them, like bread crumbs. My eyes followed them until they reached the origin. A pile of them.

There had to be dozens of Silver Bannermen on this ship. We had the misfortune of running into the mess hall a number of hours ago. The mistake that led to this chase. Where they had all been gathered before. A third had hunted for Susan and I in the cargo. A third had chased after Chris. The final third had gone after Rose. From

all the mercenaries gathered all in once place before, I had to be looking at a fifth of them. Almost two dozen bodies strewn around, most of them in that one place. At that once place there was only one person left standing.

I stepped forward, putting my hands on Susan and Chris' shoulders, pushing my way to the front. Their faces were... vacant. Maybe terror was the right word? Their eyes were wide, their jaws slightly slackened. As I stepped forward I got a clearer view of the one standing atop the ruins. She was standing tall even though there were a couple arrows sticking out from her back and one out of her left bicep. A sword in her right hand. The ribbon in her hair had been shredded, her scruffy long red hair fluttering in the turbulent winds behind her. Her tail swished back and forth quietly, but on its ridge was a raging inferno, spitting our embers and crackling like a campfire.

It looked like she was in a trance, her eyes cast downward, her shoulders slightly slumped over. But when my foot snapped a black charred floorboard, she raised her head. Her head slowly turned toward me and I could finally see her eyes.

A pair of amber colored eyes. Crocodile eyes. They glowed with the fire shining in them, except those eyes didn't have any light themselves. It was as though her pupils had vanished completely. They looked dull as they stared right into me, no emotion on her face.

My throat was parched from the heat, but I spoke out despite the choking smoke, “Rose?”

Or maybe... Just maybe, for the first time... I was meeting The Thorn Knight.

Chapter 53

Ash and smoke swept across the deck, tumbling down from the skies after being thrown into the sky by pillars of smoke scattered about in the field of destruction. All of it was centered around one solitary figure: Rose. Wounded, but unbowed; a small army of mercenaries dispatched around her. But there was something very wrong. The expression on Rose's face was not one I had seen before. It was empty. It had no life to it. Her tail burned brightly, but even amidst the remains of what must have been one hell of a battle, there was no grin on her face, there was no sparkle in her eyes.

I stood there, undaunted. Mostly. I returned the soulless gaze as it stared into me. My heart beat like crazy and I felt like I was being overcome with a cold sweat. It was not an unfamiliar feeling, but it was one that made me sick to my stomach. Sick that I would even feel that all too familiar feeling. A feel of dread. It had been some time since I last felt this feeling. My breathing was heavy, raspy. Regardless, I stepped forward again even as my legs shook.

My feet snapped the smouldering wooden planks as I climbed up the pile of debris. The closer I got, the closer her eyes became and the deeper they penetrated me. Those frightening lifeless eyes. There was no sparkle within them and just their gaze was enough to make my body feel heavy. An oppressing force trying to push me back down as though gravity had suddenly multiplied in magnitude. Until her eyes finally focused on me. Like a nictitating membrane, light spread across her eyes. Faster than I could react Rose, dropped her sword and slid down off her perch of ruin toward me. She collided into me, nearly knocking me over.

“Laven!” She squealed glowingly.

She wrapped her arms and me and buried her face into my chest. I felt like something was tearing me apart inside. A wash of guilt that swept away my cold sweat and stilled my heart. But when I put my arms around her, I quickly pulled them back because I felt something else that was wet and warm. Two arrows were still jutting out from her back and even one from her left arm. Trickles of hot blood trickling from the wounds and a different kind brand of panic washed over me.

“Rose! You're wounded.”

“What? These? This is nothing.” She said with a smile.

“There are arrows sticking out of you.”

'Again', I wanted to add, but I stopped myself.

“Oh, Chris and Susan. What's up?” Rose said peering over my shoulder at the other two girls behind me.

Those two shook back to reality when their names were called.

Rose cocked her head confused by their reactions as though she had forgotten everything that had happened up here. Well, I suppose there are only a few people now who know exactly what happened here. I'd rather let everything that happened here be forgotten, but before we could do that, we'd need to get the hell out of here.

"Rose, we need to get out of here."

"Get out of here? What are talking about?" Rose asked, tilting her head the other way.

"We got thirty seconds before every mercenary on this boat floods this deck."

"All of them?" She said while letting me go to pick up her sword that had finished sliding down the pile of ruin on its own.

"Yes, all of them."

"All in one place?" She said with a smile while brushing off the soot and dust off the blade.

"Yes, all in one- Rose! Not now, we have to get out of here."

"The four of us can take em all. Easy. They attack one at a time, I've had meals harder than these guys." Rose boasted.

"Not now Rose." I turned toward Susan and Chris, "Let's find a lifeboat or something."

"Lifeboat?" Rose said wistfully.

Susan and Chris split up to search while I stayed to get it through Rose's thick skull. I grabbed Rose by the shoulders, not that she was going anywhere, but I needed her to focus on me and my words very carefully and actually consider them. Not just let them go in one ear and out the other. I just hope her warpath hadn't burned all the boats all up

"It isn't just the fight, Rose. It'll turn into a battle of attrition. They got enough magic to keep coming long after we tire. We're not gonna last another hour on this boat at best. No in one piece. We need to leave. Now."

"I've fought worse battles with worser odds. Just leave it to me." She said with a smile.

"Rose, we don't have time for-" I said irritated I had to start raising my voice to get it through, but then I stopped.

I had been shaking before and I noticed my hands were still shaking, but not the rest of me... Not because of me. Was it... Rose? I felt my hands slacken and Rose threw me off, backing away, refusing to make eye contact. I was at a loss.

"Laven!" Came Susan's voice from behind.

Chris was circling in the air above and came swooping down and landed beside her. They were both pointing in the direction of a cabin at the edge of the devastation and when I nodded they went around the corner. I looked back at Rose who was still refusing to

make eye contact. I was going to say something, but a startling sound came from behind us. At the opening in the deck where the stairs are, I heard an all too familiar cacophony. The Silver Bannermen were finally catching up.

I grabbed hold of Rose's claw and pulled her along forcefully. I heard her protest, but I ignored her. She may be strong, but she was also still light as a regular girl for her height. We ran and followed Susan and Chris who were already waiting at a sizable boat hanging off the side of the barge by rope and pulley. The boat was big enough and it hadn't been damaged or destroyed like others on this side of the barge. It would make pursuit difficult if we jacked this one. It's not like they can alter the heading of this massive ship. That would require direct Imperial orders.

Chris and Susan had already vaulted over the side of the lifeboat and were preparing to release it into the water below. It was just Rose and I still on the barge. I turned around to follow, but a stray arrow shot just wide of my head and into the side of the boat. When I turned around, I saw that one of the Bannermen was calling out to his companions and then getting ready to notch another arrow.

"You'll never make it." Rose said.

"What?" I replied. "Come on Rose, we need to get in now!"

"You'll be sitting ducks. Fish in a barrel all the way to the bottom..."

"Rose!" I called out again grabbing her by the shoulder again.

This time Rose didn't just stand there and take it. One of her claws seized me by the scruff of my jerkin. Her grip was frighteningly powerful. With a small explosion of fire from her tail, she mustered the strength to throw me. She bent her knees and put everything into it. I was sent up and over the side of the lifeboat and then fell inside. I was scrambling to right myself and I peeked my head over the life boat.

"I'll hold them off." She said looking up at me with a smile. "I can hold em off till this hunk o' wood gets to port. I'll met ya back on dry land."

"Rose! Get up here right now." I ordered, my words seething mad.

I watched as the archer took another shot, but Rose parried it out of the air with her sword, cleaving the shaft in half.

"Go!" She screamed while spinning around to chop her sword through the rope holding the boat in place.

I felt the lifeboat slowly descend. For the brief moment, the lifeboat was at eye level with the deck I saw the archer was joined by another two who all fired their next volley all at once. I tried to jump up and reach out to Rose, but when one of the arrows passed by Rose, I

felt a weight press down on me and the color green envelop me. The arrow had been on a direct collision course with my skull, but Chris had leapt up and covered me with her body, sending the arrow deflecting off her wings.

"Master! Stay down!"

Chris was heavy, her wings an impenetrable fortress to the arrows. But soon I felt the boat rock with the sound of explosions. I heard Susan pant heavily and grunt with the chorus of thunderclaps, her divine energies most likely straining past their limit to reflect a magic barrage all concentrated on this little lifeboat. After all, the ship was long and there was more room than just above us where Rose was guarding the winch to shot at us from. But she was protecting us from the ideal spot to fire down at us like she said, fish in a barrel.

Why was Rose so dead set staying behind? Is this really the way it has to be? 'There are arrows sticking out of you, again'. That thought which went through my head came to me again. Why? Seeing Rose standing there, with arrows sticking out of her, fresh from the river not long after we first met... That image flashed before my eyes. That embrace when she came to her senses and rushed toward me no more than a minute ago. She was... Shaking. Was she shaking then?... In that river. Back in the forest. Even further back before the party at the Duke's. When she seemed worried. What was she worried about? A boat? But she'd rather stay up there. No. Not it's not the boat. Why isn't she here? Where we're going. The lake... The lake!

Where else where she also shaking? Another memory flashes before me. Just a few words. Some very poignant words.

Because. I'm. In love.

No. I wasn't going to let this happen. Not like this. Not ever.

I put every last bit of my strength to stand up. Chris wasn't expecting it and even she was thrown off me and fell backs into the boat. I could hear Susan and Chris protest, warning me, begging me to step back, but that didn't stop me. I could see the side of the barge now, we were already a few meters on our way, arrows and spells were being flung in our direction like stones, but I wasn't afraid. Maybe I had lost my sanity?

Above me I could see the pulley where the ropes were slipping through. Ropes attached the winch up on deck. I climbed up to the highest ground of the lifeboat and I reached out with both hands for a pair of ropes sliding past each other. The pain was instant; a Charley Horse for my palms. Two thick ropes supporting most of the life boat's weight that wanted to keep moving... I wrapped my hands around it and held the two ropes together. It didn't stop right away, so I grabbed on tighter. Through the smell of burning rope and skin, I held on so tight I could hear my own fingers creak even with the sound of battle all

around me up above and around me as hell still rained down on me.

Neither Susan nor Chris stepped up to pull me down. If they wanted to, if they felt they had to, they could pull me back with ease. I wouldn't go easily, I'd still hold on till my hands broke and only if my hands broke and went limp at the same time. The longer I held onto the rope, the more slack in it started to accumulate. The more slack that accumulated, the more I was holding up all the weight of the lifeboat on my own. Not just my fingers, but my arms started to creak and my muscles sounding like they were ready to tear. But I refused to let go.

"Rose," I screamed as loud as I could. "Rose!"

I held on as tight as I could, but I was only human. I was only human, but I'd break if I had to. If I could hold on for just a few moments longer. I held on tight and a stray arrow found its mark in my left arm. I felt it go right to the bone. I felt it break it. The pain caused my whole left arm to go numb and limp, but I still didn't let go. I gripped tightly with my right hand. Tighter than a human being ever should. I couldn't help but scream when the ropes slid past one another again. Of course they would, they were lubricated in my own blood. Skin was tearing off my palm, but I still grabbed on tight and after about twenty centimeters of slack, the ropes held steady again.

My left arm was hanging at my side; numb and useless. My right arm, stretching up as far as it could go. I could feel my arm ready to pop out of my shoulder at any moment. I refused to let go.

"Rose!" I screamed again, this time blood curdlingly so. "Rose, I'm right here! Rose!"

The sound of battle above me was starting to fade, only because the pain I was feeling was starting to drown everything else out. The focus and effort I was exerting was deafening everything, even the pain... slightly. A stray ray of purplish white light grazed my face, cutting my cheek like a blade. That wasn't nearly enough to stop me. Even when stray embers from fireballs scorched and burned my skin, it wasn't enough to stop me.

"Rose! I'm... I'm right here! Come on, Rose!"

I could feel my limit quickly approaching. I felt my hand slip again, coating the ropes in another fresh layer of red paint. I gripped down hard again, but I could feel the delicate bones in my hands reach their limit at last. There's no way I could muster the strength to clench down again. I could feel a wet trickle down my left arm. I could feel a wet trickle down my face as droplets of blood dripped from the rope above me and onto my face. I won't mince words or try to act macho, I felt another more clear liquid stream down my cheeks as well.

"Rose... I'm... right here." I said again, but this time I couldn't scream, it was more of a whimper.

There was no way it was loud enough for anyone to hear.

I grit my teeth and continued to hold on. Not for dear life, that didn't matter to me right now. I was holding on for... I'm holding on for... I'm holding on and nothing will stop me; not even myself. Although my body was wracked with pain I looked up and at the edge I saw an object that wasn't an arrow or ball of energy drop. It fell right into the boat. Right on top of Susan who barely managed to catch it. It was long, a little thin, it was... My... no, Rose's sword in its scabbard.

I looked back up in a panic and screamed with everything I had left in my lungs, “Ro-!”

As I looked up, I saw a pair of claws wrap around the edge of the boat and someone vaulted over the edge. It had to have happened all so fast, but as I watched it, it seemed so very slow. Long red hair and a streak of fire trailing after her, Rose vaulted over the side and entered a free fall. There were a couple more arrows in her back, a new one in her left calve, but she seemed otherwise okay. She reached out with her arms toward me and with my one good arm, I let go of the rope and reached out for her. All the slack I had been accumulating dropped the boat immediately and it entered into its own free fall toward the lake's surface.

Rose had picked up more speed than we had, but there was a brief moment in time while both of us were suspended in the air very close to each other, reaching out for one another. Even though I had no skin left on my palm, I locked fingers with Rose's, the blood drenching her fingers from her arrow wound and the blood of my hand meeting, sticking together. We pulled each other into embrace and held on tightly. There was a second where we were still in free fall pressing our bodies close together before the boat below us crashed into the waves violently. I felt my back smash into the wooden bottom, but luckily neither broke.

I held tightly onto Rose, but nowhere near as tight as she held onto me. Her face buried in my chest.

“Because.... Because...” She kept repeating quietly to herself.

My left arm was in searing pain, but I willed it to move anyway. I reached up and dropped my hand on the top of her head and patted her, gently stroking her head. I leaned my head forward and rested my forehead against her as well. I kept doing so even as she kept mumbling unintelligibly to herself. I kept doing it till she stopped shaking... At least until she stops shaking so much. Someone whose lifeblood is fire, surrounded by so much water which was so deep... I don't think anyone with a heart would blame her. Least of all me.

Susan regained her balance and got up and went desperately searching for the lifeboats oars, but the look on her face as she looks

panicked while staring overboard wasn't a good sign.

“Chris... Some assistance.”

“How we're going, we don't need oars.” Chris replied calmly with a cocky tone.

She dug her talons into the sides of the boat as she straddled it at one end and with her mighty wings folded them back and then beat them. A rush of air propelled the small lifeboat forward, skimming over the waves. The arrows, magic missiles and fireballs still came raining down, but they got further and further away. Less and less accurate. After only a few wing beats to pick up some acceleration we were coasting lazily away.

The further we got, the further we got away from the oppressing billows of smoke from the top deck and the white-grey darkness of the smoke and ash was replaced by a cloudless dawn sky, glowing a radiant pink. Susan was sitting, in meditation at one end of the boat, while Chris' wings propelled us onward, her tail in the water acting like a rudder. Rose still clung to me, slightly shaking as the boat rocked back and forth, as water splashed in from the sides and into the boat as it crashed into the subtle waves on the lake surface. But we were both okay. More or less. I'd need some healing for the blood loss, broken bones and missing flesh, but all in all, I was okay.

We gently cruised away from the barge in silence as it carried on its way. Until the barge which was now in the distance threw up a fresh plume of smoke. Soon after a roaring explosion rolled over the waves and over our boat. Following soon after were a series of rough waves that caused Rose to hold onto me even more tightly than before, nearly crushing me now.

As her body pressed more fiercely into my own, I allowed myself to be distracted by her large breasts squishing into my chest. Which you'll have to forgive me for, because I'm in a lot of fucking pain right now and I need every positive thing I can get right now. But even that was interrupted when Rose's thighs pressed up against me and by my right jean pocket, I felt something jab into my skin. Something like a pin and it was enough to cause me to flinch.

It was driving me crazy and I had to fish whatever splinter it was before it drove me insane. I freed my hand and reached into my pocket and finally pulled out what felt like a small pebble. At least it had the texture of one. What I pulled out and held up for my eyes to see was more like a sliver of rock rather than wood. It was thin, sharp on the edges and no bigger than a nail clipping from my pinky finger. It wasn't just any rock, it was blue, translucent and refracted the pink dawn gloriously. I don't know what it was, or where it come from, but it was beautiful.

While I was busying admiring the stone, it turned out the first

explosion wasn't the last. Chris, Susan and I watched as another three plumes erupted near and around the waterline of the barge in several places. I quickly slipped the stone back into my pocket and held onto Rose tight. We all had to hold on tight as the massive explosions sent wave after violent wave in our direction, tossing us up, down and nearly flipping us over a few times if Chris hadn't steered and held the whole boat aloft in the air for a couple seconds at a time by beating her wings. We then watched the monster sized barge in the distance, slowly list, crack, break and sink. Finally disappearing beneath the waves in the distance.

We had been one that barge only minutes ago. We didn't even words to say. We watched it happen solemnly, but when silence returned and the waves calmed down. I lamented.

“They're going to blame that on me too, aren't they?”

***

Wave after wave crashes upon the shores of lake Anthren, coating the rocky and sometimes sandy beaches with all manner of things. Seaweed, driftwood, but in this case a man. A man cloaked in a wet green cloak, his face obscured by a black woolen mask. A hot spring sun was looming overhead.

The man who had washed up on shore was breathing heavily. Just as well, he was drenched head to toe. If it had been a cold day, or a windy day, he might catch his death of pneumonia. He didn't even have the strength to stand. All he could do was reach out with his hands and pull himself forward; pull himself free from the waves and the chilly lake water. When he finally dragged himself past the tide line, her flipped onto his back and pulled the mask off his head and threw it away.

Hidden underneath was a man with platinum blonde hair with blue eyes. His face distinct, handsome, but not overly so. It was a little too effeminate despite his broad shoulders. Not the kind of face you'd think twice about pounding in the midst of a drunken bar brawl. He wheezed and coughed up lake water and eventually he mustered the strength to sit upright. To save his life he had to swim most of the way to shore, he was just fortunate enough for the currents to carry him to shore. He could have drowned, easily. After contemplating how close he had come to death, he caught his breath and pulled himself to his feet. He found a piece of drift wood he used as a makeshift walking stick and hobble off the beach and into the forest.

There was no earthly way of knowing, which way this man was going. He didn't have the strength to pull himself over the brush and he might not have the strength or energy to get back on his feet if he crawled. If he fell asleep in the forest as he was... a cougar, bear or wolf may find him. That fear spurred him on at his primal core, but

there was something else that caused him to trudge onward.

For another hour, he hiked through the woods, half dead. He kept going until he reached a tree. Not just any tree, a very large, very old tree. It had to be over three hundred years at the very least. It was at the base of this tree that the man allowed himself to collapse. He sprawled out on the forest floor and nearly did not awaken again. Soon the chirping of the birds and chitter of the small woodland mammals ceased. His face was in the dirt and leaves, but he could still hear the sound of boots on the ground approach.

“He's finally arrived.” A lascivious woman's voice cooed

And he'sss alive?” A voice hissed crackling with a tint of static

“Thankfully.”

The sound of voices stirred the man awake and while he was still sapped of all his strength and laying on the ground looked up. There he saw a woman with tan skin and very, very long white hair, who had sat herself on a nearby stump. She was dressed in violet colored leather, more like a scantily clad dominatrix than a forest ranger. The footsteps he heard were a pair of violet colored, knee high and heeled boots Resting horizontally on the sides of her head were long elf ears. She was seated now on one of the tree's roots, hunched over, resting her chin in her hands, her elbows resting on her thighs. Her eyes were colored red, droopy, lazy and reserved, but she wore a smile that was... mischievous, sinisterly so. Her whole face was devilishly beautiful and alluring and a distinct shade of rouge tinged her cheeks which almost betrayed some sort of innocence, if only it weren't for that grin.

“Good afternoon, Jacob.” The dark elf said, greeting the man politely.

“Where is she?” Jacob spat back, talking mostly into the dirt.

“Do not be angry, Jacob.” The static voice said calmly. “I'm right here.”

“Not you, witch! Where is my sister?”

“Now now, that'sss not how the deal went.”

“I hand over nothing till she's safe!” Jacob said while rising defiantly to his feet.

The dark elf watched with raised eyebrows, impressed at the feat which must have taken a great deal of willpower, but the other did not change her expression overall.

“Not a thing till I know my sister will be okay... Viper.”

A small hand mirror had been propped up on a tree branch next to the dark elf and reflected on the steely grey surface was an image. An image of a woman with the lower body of a snake. Her head was adorned with shoulder length brown hair, green snake like eyes, long

pointed elven ears drooping from each side of her head, but brown unlike her white skin. She had long sharp fingernails, that might just as well be claws, and from the hips down, a snake's body, the scales an intricate pattern of brown, light green and white. At the end of her tail was a rattle which was waving back and forth gently, sound like a lazy maraca.

"Your dear poor sssissster'ssss illnesss will be cured, Jacob. We had already bought her more time. Time enough for you to run your errand for usss. I'vvve already done more than we needed to. Now isss your turn to pay back with inetessst. Ssshow me you have ttthe ssstone."

Jacob watched the two closely while put his hands into his pocket. The two girls watched him with rapt attention. Jacob's stern and defiant negotiating face soon cracked a little. He reached into his other pocket and fished around. Then his eyes shot wide open and he untied his sealed pouches and emptied their contents on the forest floor. He dropped down on all fours to sift through the debris.

"No.... no no no no. No!" He said in a panic, his hands shaking.

"Jacob," Viper said very seriously. "Isss thisss your idea of a joke? You ssshould know that you are not a funny man."

"I had it. I had it. I swear I had it. I just misplaced it! I had to pocket it real quick when I got the chance. I wasn't thinking. But I stuffed it... Somewhere safe just before I got off the ship!"

"We're not here for charity, little man." The dark elf said, her voice becoming very bored.

Jacob's eyes were wide open. He rested on his knees now, trying to remember. Trying to remember for dear life. In the middle of the forest before two monsters even if only one only there by proxy his life was in danger. His eyes flickered back and forth in their sockets as he desperately tried to remember.

"I planted the charges like you said and then... when everyone else was running about I swiped the keys and then... no one saw me when I... I..." Jacob's eyes went wide. "I ran into... that guy..."

"Ja-cob." The dark elf moaned impatiently.

"I- I don't have it." He squirmed under the vicious looks both the monsters gave him. "But I do know who has it! A guy... Ran into him on the way out... Really hard, must have slipped loose. Pickpocket style. Ha ha ha, can't believe a professional like me fell for the basics like that."

"Who?" Viper hissed, her eyes glowering like a gorgon's, frightening and nearly turning Jacob to stone.

Jacob's mind was reeling, he was feeling the pressure, but he eventually coughed it up, "Master... Laven... His name was Laven!"

Viper's glower turned to surprise, “What did you jussst sssay?”

“Laven. The guy everyone else was chasing all over the ship. Gave me the distraction I needed to crack my way to the stone. Bought me the time to escape to while everyone tried to stop him from getting away.”

Jacob felt as though everything hadn't been a total failure, all he'd have to do was go and get the stone back, the guy had strange company. It wouldn't be impossible for a man of skills to track him down. Difficult if this Laven kept away from towns and didn't want to be found, but for his sister, he would do anything. Just as he was rebuilding his confidence, Viper started laughing.

The dark elf and Jacob looked on awestruck and a little scared as Viper started slowly, but ended up laughing loud, uncontrollably, manically. Slapping her hand against her snake tail, her rattle rattling loudly.

“Good. Good. Ttthat will be good enough, Jacob.” Viper said trying not to laugh, but then her voice and expression became very serious, very suddenly. “Your job isss done.”

The expression on Jacob didn't change and asked while still dumbfounded, “What are you saying? What about the deal?”

“I ssshall sssee to it that your sssissster isss well taken care of.” Viper said with a very twisted smile on her face.

Recovering from a laughing fit couldn't explain that face.

“No... No! You wouldn't... You can't!”

A terrible thought dawned on Jacob.

He screamed and scrambled to his feet and charged the two in anger. “You monst-!”

A crack echoed off the trees and the forest went silent. In the dark elf's hand, the handle of a whip. The leather of the whip, lashed out and wrapped around Jacob's neck. Jacob could hardly breath let alone speak. His hand was in his inner cloak pocket, but he had frozen still.

“Naughty naughty boy.” The dark elf said.

The dark elf gave the handle of the whip a twist and lightning crackled and leapt down the leather until it reached and electrocuted Jacob. His screams sent birds from far and wide from the tree canopies into the skies above. His hand went numb and a short sword hidden away in his cloak fell to the forest floor. When he reached out for it, it snapped back with residual charge that threw his hand back. Steam rose from his body as the shocks continued from the whip and he fell to his knees. All his strength had left his body all at once and he knelt there, near lifeless with a blank defeated look in his eyes.

“Natasssha... I apologissse for making you look after thisss

fool for too long."

"Oh no, Viper. It was fun." Natasha giggled.

"I need time alone to ttthink."

"I'm sure you do."

"He'sss yoursss now. Do withhh him what you like."

"I had hoped you would say that all along. Very generous of you, Viper. I've always wanted one."

"Take a sssabbatical. That'sss an order. You work too hard."

"Oh, I'll tell you all about the honeymoon when I'm done. Done breaking him in. Fu fu fu fu. Ha ha ha ha!"

Far away, Viper sat alone in a dark parlor, coiled up in front of a large mirror through which she saw the world reflected in the hand mirror. She closed her eyes, but she could still hear through the mirror. She could hear Natasha berate her captive.

"Such a lowlife you are." Natasha's voice was no longer lazy, but fierce and harsh. "How many of your comrades died for your selfish desires? How many of those poor men and women had brothers and sisters too? How many of them had older brothers and sisters that will grieve for them? You spineless cur. Aren't you Bannermen supposed to be like brothers and sisters? A traitor like you is no better than filth. Treating you like a human is too good for someone as low as you. You're like filthy, dirty pond water. Not even suited to wash my boots. But Natasha still believes in you. Natasha will still love you despite everything. Even if no one would ever forgive you, I will. Yes, only Natasha will, but first you must lick my boot clean like the pond scum you are. Ahhhh~ that face. That face," She cooed in ecstasy. "I love that defiant face... almost as much..."

The sound of an electrical shock and the man's screaming fills the still air of Viper's parlor.

"Yes, that face... I LOVE that face most of all! Now lick it. Lick it clean. Yes. Yes, that's right, just like that. Fu fu fu fu. HA HA HA HA-"

With a snap of her finger, the image on the mirror vanished and the audio died.

Viper opened her eyes and saw her own reflection looking back at her. She sat there coiled up while she pondered. Vilmheim and Domdracveria had slipped from Imperial and Church hands so quickly and the entire North and the pagans have been emboldened by recent events because of it. With rumors and fears about a looming crisis within the Empire and a possible civil war, everyone else is near panicking. The far north is not a place to keep such a previous stone either A Shard of The Second Tear most of all. Not with the demon realms of Vilmheim and now a Dragon Princess so close.

It was inevitable that they would move it south, but Viper had

one upped them this time. Her last plan had failed, but this one had gone perfectly. All it required was the sacrifice of one sleeper agent. She didn't have the stone in her grasp, but it was out of Church hands. The hands it was in, was good enough. She felt that she could recover it at her leisure when she needed it. That was good enough for her. Lake Anthren was thought to be bottomless. Everything on that barge will be presumed lost to the confines of that deep dark lake. And the Empire is down one Colossal Barge. Not something they can replace easily. Even if the Imperial coffers were full. Their ability to defend their northern boarder from the pagan north and the demon realms dotting them would be greatly hindered. Supply lines would be stressed, unmanageable. Further rash crusades sponsored by the Church would be suicide missions. Typhon had won a great victory today, even if it didn't achieve every objective.

But this Laven character, Viper thought to herself. Who exactly is this man? She had met him only briefly before, but was there more to this man than she first thought? Were the rumors true that he turned the tide of the civil war in Domdracveria by himself? Where was he going now? What mayhem would he cause just by being nearby? How could she benefit from it?

“Lavvven.” Viper hissed. “Coincidence? Or...” She chuckled to herself. “What 'ssstar' above guidesss you?”

Viper continued to chuckle to herself, then broke into laughter in the darkness of her parlor. Her rattle shaking fiercely and filling the still and stagnant air with a foreboding sound.

Chapter 54

I felt myself hanging weightless in inky-black darkness; it was an oppressing feeling that seemed all too familiar. This sensation is one I had felt before, but I was not sure where. It was as though there was an empty spot in my memories. Fleeting, but you still know it is there. A picture with a piece cut out of it, the missing square from a painting and only a canvas, a question, underneath. It was not like my memories of another world, my world. It wasn't stray knowledge that trickled in. It was a frustrating feeling of not being able to comprehend something that should be so simple. Something that should be so obvious. Instead there was nothing but darkness. Emptiness all around me.

That absolute darkness was not banished when I opened my eyes and the infinite expanse in all directions pushed me to the brink of panic. Before I lost my mind, a billowing mist swept in and behind it was light. It was dim, as though a bulb wrapped in a blanket. That light was indomitable before the infinite expanse and the emptiness proved to be just an illusion as hills and tall craggy snow topped mountains emerged from the mists. The endless expanse of darkness was replaced by a sea of green, an enormous forest of pine trees divided by winding blue rivers and to the west where the sun was rising through the mist the sea.

That forest enveloped me and I sunk into it, the feeling of weightlessness was soon gone as the hard ground pushed back and in turn gravity once again pushed me down. I was disorientated and stuck my hand out to hold myself up. This reality came together gradually like a jigsaw puzzle and from the eerie silence a bustle of noise came to me all at once. Fresh crisp air with the heavy smell of pine filled my nose, a bitter cold win stung my sinus. The last of the senses returned with the gentle howling wind, the rustling of the forest, the sound of the wild and in the distance the crash of waves upon the rocky beach.

Rising above the forest's din was a chipper voice belonging to a child. It heralded his arrival as he burst through the bushes with a stick in hand, waving it about like a sword. I immediately recognized the boy. A buzz-cut haircut of brown so thin it looked blonde and shining blue eyes. My recognition of the boy was instinctual even though there were more than ten years between us, the boy who didn't look a day over nine bounced excitedly down the forest trail. When he spoke, I knew my gut intuition was spot on.

“Sir Tamerlion escapes King Tom's goons, but what of the brave knight lost in the fairy woods?” The boy narrated. “What will become of our brave hero?”

“How about the knight kindly waits for his elders?” A raspy old voice said calling from further down the trail.

An old man came from around the bend in the path. His hair was milky white, cut short and male pattern balding had not been kind to him. His face had aged no better, his features were sunk and wrinkles pulled down his features, but his eyes were a glistening and lively blue. They looked just as bright as the boy's, my own. He also watched my energetic and younger self with a smile on his face and he followed after him with ease. The man looked old, but his back was straight and the steep trail didn't appear to rob him of his breath. The more I looked at both of them, the eyes, nose and jaw line, the similarities were there. There was only one conclusion: This man had to be related to me.

I stood between the two, but neither of them paid any attention to me. They should I'm a stranger on a path in the middle of the woods. I must be a ghost to them, just an observer. There was no other explanation Were these memories of mine? The perspective was all wrong though, when the boy did not listen and continued on ahead I watched as the old man walked past me mumbling to himself with a smile on his face. There's no way I would remember seeing that, would I? I had to chase after the two because my surroundings were no longer pushing and pulling me about.

When I caught up with the two, the boy was standing on top of a rock so that his eyes were level with the old man.

“And who are you? Grandpa?” The boy asked.

The old man laughed. “Don't you mean stranger?”

The boy went red in the face. He had broke character so easily and it flustered him. The old man spoke with a distinctive south drawl and his voice although raspy had a certain jovial tinge to it.

“If you're lost in these woods, I can guide you. I used to be a ranger. I'm just an old priest now, but let me guide you.”

The boy did an exaggerated double take. “I'm wanted by King Tom, you'll put yourself in danger!”

“Never liked Tom anyways.” The old man grinned.

“Very well! Uh, sir...?”

“Just call me Little John.”

“Grandpa!” The boy moaned. “That's Robin Hood.”

“It works, don't it?”

The kid groaned but soon got back into character, “Well then John, let's go! We need to rescue Princess Kim!”

“A princess, huh? That's a good cause.” The old man's face twisted into a mischievous grin. “She got a good rack on her?”

“Grandpa!” The boy screamed, breaking character yet again.

“Just trying to get motivated.” The old man said while shrugging off the boy's protests. “She is a real humdinger ain't she though?”

A sudden storm kicked up and violent winds blew the mist all around me. I flinched and covered myself, but the two didn't seem bothered by it at all. Rather, I'd say they didn't see or feel it at all. The mists roiled and coiled around me, as though they were the very sands of time. When the storm had finished, I was standing somewhere else, somewhere nearby, but the old man and the boy were in a clearing and setting up a tent in the middle of the woods. The mists swirled every so often and I watched as the old man's fingers still had the dexterity to show the boy different types of knots and although I couldn't hear the words come out from his mouth, but I'm sure the old man was teaching him and the boy watched on with glimmering eyes.

I blinked and the camp scene before me was gone. I looked left and right and found myself alone in a different clearing and I jumped when I heard a loud bang. My heart nearly burst when I head the whiz crack pass my way and if I wasn't some sort of ghostly specter inside my dream I may have shat myself when it cracked and whizzed another two times. After the forth pop I heard a distinctive clang behind me. When I looked, I saw a line of cans one a bunch of tree stumps all lined up in a row. Another bang, whiz and clang sent one of the cans spinning into the air and onto the ground.

Back where the bangs were coming from, I saw the old man kneeling beside the boy. In the boy's hands was what looked like an old M1911A1. I don't even know why or from where that series of numbers and letters entered my head, but I recognized that gun. The old man and the boy were wearing earmuffs and glasses, after the second can went down the boy turned excitedly toward the old man, but he old man quickly grabbed hold of the boy's hands and lowered the weapon toward the ground. I could see the frown on his face from here as he also pried the boy's finger off the trigger and placed it next to the cylinder.

The winds swirled once again and the mist erased the scene, but soon reconstructed the inside of a house. Hardwood floors and walls all around with very old furniture. If it weren't for the television, rotary television and the odd other electronic I could have sworn I had gone even further back in time, maybe another seventy years or more. In the living room by a crackling fireplace I saw the old man walking back into the room with a locked wooden box and the boy seated on a stool in front of the old man's recliner.

“This is the thang I'm talking about.” The old man said as he sat down and undid the lock with the proper combination.”

The boy looked on intently as the old man pulled out a blue

ribbon necklace with a bronze five pointed star, that star was surrounded by green laurels with an intricate design of an eagle in the very center of the star itself. Above the star was a collection of white stars on the blue background.

"This little thang I got way way back. Back at Unsan. Not a pretty place. Lot of guys didn't come back that day. A lot of good friends." The old man said while handing the medal over to the boy to get a closer look at.

"What did you get it for?" The boy asked.

"Bravery." The old man answered curtly. "Not sure you'd call it bravery sitting behind two layers of sandbags on a hill with a .30 cal. But I guess quite a few of our guys who took a stray bullet or two over the days lived to see tomorrow. A lot of other guys there did more than I did. Suppose I was just the flashiest and a higher up saw me do it."

"What did you do there?"

"Held back a company or two of reds while our men cleared out our wounded behind me. We were getting surrounded, see? Even then I and a lot of our boys couldn't do much. We didn't get a lot of thanks or kind words after all we did either..."

A shadow spread over the old man's face and I watched as his lively eyes glistened and shook, as though he was ready to cry. The boy was still looking on intently, but the held out his hand with a smile.

"How about we get some dinner ready? I think I got some bear left in the freezer. How about it?"

"Whoa! Bear?" The kid said with eyes wide in shock. "Really? Bear? You can eat bear?"

"Yeah, last fall with some hunting friends of mine. Come on."

The boy handed back the medal and jumped up to his feet. He rushed out of the room, probably toward where the freezer was. I watched the old man hold the medal in his hands and look at it with forlorn eyes before slowly placing it back into the small box with slightly shaky hands before getting up to follow the boy.

Mist swept through the room, but did not remove it this time. It merely washed over it and the old man and boy reappeared, the boy inspecting a picture on a cabinet. The old man came up from behind with a smile on his face.

"That would be your grandma," The old man said. "Pretty thing, wasn't she?"

I approached closer and looked at the photo over both their shoulders and say a black and white photo in the case. Two people were standing before a brand new post-war house, a young man and woman. The man had the same jawline and features as the old man, but his shoulders were way broader, his chest and other muscles bulging and filled with youth. He had a full head of hair, a smile ear to

ear and his arm around a woman. She had her hair done up in curls behind her head. It was very much with the times, I'm sure. Her smile was more reserved, but she had an overall calmer attitude than that of the man, her eyes were a little droopy and lazy. She was radiantly beautiful though, almost movie star material. Maybe it was just that she contrasted so much with the meat head guy standing beside her with his arm around her shoulder. The last thing I noticed was her hand on the arm that was over her shoulder. I noticed the pair of wedding bands.

"I don't know how I ever got so lucky," the old man said wistfully.

"What do you mean?" The boy asked titling his head to the side.

"She was way too good for a meat head like me."

"Then, why do you think she did?"

"Forty years later and even I still don't know. She laughed at all my stupid jokes and thought my sexual harassment was charming. Every time I asked her, she just smiled and said she'd never met another man like me and thought she'd never met another one like me. She was a bit of an odd one, but I knew I'd too never met another gal like that."

"Do you miss her?" The boy asked.

"More than you can ever imagine." The old man said solemnly. "She's with the angels now. About just before you were born. She would have loved an odd ball like you. I'm sure you two would have gotten along right off the bat."

I watched the old man's face brighten just as the mists carried away my surroundings and roiled violently. The forest and the house were nowhere to be seen. Instead I heard the distinctive sound of a roaring plane's engine as they approached the tarmac. The same snow capped mountains, rivers and seas of forests were in all directions but I was an air control tower rose out from the mist and an airport formed around me. I spotted the old man standing beside me in front of an old Bronco truck by the entrance to the main terminal. Then the boy, just a little taller than he was last time finally emerged, a staff member leaving him be when she spotted and waved to the old man.

There was something wrong though. As the boy pulled his luggage along and approached, he was limping a little and when I got a clear look at his face, he had a black eye and, bruises and cuts. The shock was palpable on the old man's face. He did not say anything, he merely helped the boy put his luggage into the back of the Bronco and they took off. I could pass through the truck like a ghost, so I had to watch it pull away. The mist soon returned though and with it the same house in the woods by the sea materialized once again.

I watched the Bronco pull up the driveway and the two get out. Their faces conveyed to me that not a word had been said for however long that drive took. A long awkward silence had set in, I could feel its oppressiveness.

The old man finally broke it at last when the boy went on ahead to the house by himself, “You going to tell me what that's all about? Or am I going to have to shake it outta ya?”

The boy stopped and turned around, “About what?”

“Your face, boy. What happened?”

The kid looked down but finally looked back up at the old man and simply said, “I fell down.”

“Pretty rough fall.” The old man said skeptically.

“Really rough- ack!” The boy said, but let out a yelp

His hands flew up in front of it face to catch the keys to the Bronco that the old man and thrown at him.

“Yer hands look pretty okay to me. You also have some pretty keen reaction tine there. I reckon you would have tried to break your fall.”

The boy looked down at the ground again, his eyes watering, looking as though he was about to break down crying.

The mists swept me back into the house where the boy was seated in the old man's recliner with a fresh glass of cold water. Kneeling down in front of him was the old man, staring at the child. His face looked like it was holding back a great deal of anger.

“So you moved schools again?”

“Yes.” The boy said, his eyes puffy and red.

“And just before your summer vacation, three kids who didn't take a liking to you ganged up on ya?”

The boy nodded.

“Alright then.” The old man said rising to his feet.

He exited the room and the boy looked on with a shocked expression. Just as soon as the old man had been comforting the boy, he had left just as quickly. The man was gone for a couple minutes, I could hear him rummaging through a closet somewhere, but he eventually returned with a large cardboard box. He walked past the boy and out the rear exit to the house's backyard.

“Well, come on now!” The old man shouted clear across the house.

The boy slowly pulled himself from the chair and made his way outside to where the old man had dropped the box on the ground and was sifting through its contents. A pile of equipment had begun to pile up, but the old man finally found what he was looking for. Two brown pieces of leather. He slipped wrinkly hands into them and pounded them together. They weren't gloves, they were more like pads.

“Come here, boy,” The old man said beckoning the kid over.

“What are you doing?” The kid asked.

“Teaching you something I should have last summer. Now. Hit me square in the pad. Come on now.”

The old man knelt down and held out one of the sparring pads toward the boy, but the boy just looked on confused.

“Grandpa?” The boy asked again, perplexed.

“I said hit it. As hard as you can.”

The boy looked around, but of course it was just he and the old man. The boy approached apprehensively and when he was standing in front of the man he threw his arm up and smacked the pad with a motion much like a dog would shake a paw.

“What the hell was that?” The old man shouted, pissed.

The boy flinched in surprise.

“That ain't a punch. Hit it. Punch it!”

The boy shook, but he caught his breath and with a grunt of effort swung again just like before, but a little harder.

“Wrong!” The old man shouted.

The boy flinched again and fell backwards onto the hard ground ass first. He looked about ready to cry again.

“You think 'Tamerlion' is gonna scare King Tom's goons like that?”

The boy sat there stunned, his eyes beginning to water. The old man finally caught on that he was getting a little too worked up and reeled himself in. Taking deep breaths to calm himself down.

“They said Tamerlion was stupid.” The boy finally spoke. “Said playing pretend was for babies.”

“Who said that?” The old man asked.

The boy stayed silent, but it didn't take much for the old man to put two and two together.

“Thought so...” He grumbled. “Stand back up, son. By the time you have to go back home in the fall... If those kids pull that shit again, they're gonna regret it. Now come on.”

“But the teachers said.... My dad said...”

“Bullshit!” The old man shouted. “Best way to defend yerself is looking like you're more trouble than your worth. That only comes from knowing you can stand up when you need to. And if you need to, know that you're gonna win.”

The boy slowly got up and approached the old man again who had braced himself.

“Now, stop swinging your arm around like it's a stone on a string. I did boxing back in the corps. Come on now. Keep your arm nice and center. Lead foot a little forward. Hands up.” The old man reached out and with the pads pushed the boy's arms up to his face.

“One by the chin, the other in front of the teeth. No, don't just face me, turn a little to the side. Now pull 'er back, no, like you're pulling back on a bow. Throw that fist out just like that.”

The boy was a little overwhelmed, but he followed orders and tried to throw a punch at the old man's sparring pad. It hit the pad with a pathetic whap.

“Wrong!” The old man shouted, the boy flinching again. “Fully extend your arm all the way. And keep your fingers off your thumb, you're gonna break it. Put it over 'em. Don't just try to hit the pad. Try to hit my face. The pad's just the way, push it out of the way. Try to hit the back through the front. Got that?”

The boy shuffled back into the stance under the old man's orders and once again threw out his arm with a little grunt and louder whap stung the pad. The old man smiled and nodded.

“Like that. Come on. Do it again. Just put those kids' faces in the pad. Think of the biggest one first. Take out the big one first. You'll shake up the smaller ones. But look out!”

The old man pushed forward with the pad and hit the boy in the ribs and pushed the kid over who fell backwards onto the ground.

“Keep your arms up, but don't keep your sides open. Come on!”

He urged the boy back up and blocked the punches and with the other pad tried to push the kid over again, but the pad hit the boy's chest at a forty-five degree angle and glanced off.

“That's it. Come on. We do this enough and your muscles will remember it all. Come on now!”

A terribly violent storm of mist obliterated the scene before me as the woods, house and the two were shattered into a billion pieces, like blackish-gray sand and were put back together again forming a different place at a different time. The direction I was facing had me looking through a window that showed some sort of suburbia and the room I found myself in was some kind of office. The boy, myself, was seated on a chair, his feet dangling and not quite reaching the floor. Seated behind a desk was a pudgy older woman who was looking at the boy with fierce eyes. From all the certificates and objects scattered around the room, and from the nameplate on the desk, I was in a school principal's office.

I studied the boy sitting there more, his face was bruised, he was cut up a bit and he was sitting there sullenly, but with a smirk on his lips he couldn't wipe away. It disappeared when a woman came barging through the door. She looked like she wasn't over forty, but she was professionally dressed. I remember seeing that face somewhere before.

“Mrs. _____?” The pudgy preclinical asked, the second half

buzzing out with a horrid static that stung my brain to its core. “

“Yes, that's me.” She said, slightly out of breath. “I got here as fast as I could when the school called me.”

“Your son is here. He was caught fighting with some of the boys from his class during lunch break.”

The boy's mother turned around and glared at him with angry eyes that caused even my heart to sink. They weren't even directed at me and I could feel their pressure. The boy flinched and swallowed but looked back.

“_____, what did you do?” She asked, again the first part she was speaking blurred out in a static that sounded like a billion mosquitoes buzzing next to my head.

The boy said nothing.

“The other three boys were sent home. One of them with a broken nose. Of course, you must know we have a zero-tolerance policy for violence like this on our school grounds,” The principal said.

“I'm so very sorry. _____ will apologize and this won’t happen again. Go on now.”

“No,” The boy said

The boy's mother and the principal were taken off-guard at first, but their angry faces soon returned.

“They started it!” The boy shouted. “There were three of 'em! Why am I in trouble?”

“I asked the teachers on duty in the field. They said you attacked the three boys while screaming something about 'Tamerlion',” The principal said factually.

“They were saying they were gonna make me eat mud!” The boy screamed in return.

“_____, apologize,” The boy's mother said gravely, like a threat.

“No!” The boy yelled.

“I'm sorry Mrs. _____ but it seems like I don't have much of a choice here. After speaking with the other boys' parents, I'm going to have to suspend your son. For a week.”

“Just a minute-” The boy's mother tried to say.

The boy's mother stepped forward into the principal's face. They spoke only loud enough for the two of them to hear out of boy's ear reach, but I could hear it clearly where I was standing.

“I'm sorry. He isn't remorseful at all. It's his first offense, but to keep the other parents satisfied, I have no other choice. The boy's nose he broke, his father is on city council and he gave a black eye to another whose mother is a PTA chairwoman.”

“He'll apologize to all three of them. Just look over this just this-”

“I'm sorry Mrs. _____, but I cannot do that. Can you please take your son home now? Let him gather the things he needs here but he is not allowed back on school property until the twenty-third.”

The principal's office like all the other scenery before dematerialized along with its inhabitants. As the winds began to die down I was standing inside another house. It wasn't the cabin like before and I saw the boy seated on his bed, looking down at the floor and kicking his feet back and forth. I heard a garage door opening in the distance and my curiosity led me out of the boy's room and down to the first floor where I saw the boy's mother approach a man dressed up nicely in business attire, he left his briefcase on the ground and listened to her while loosening his tie. The man looked older than her, his brown full head of hair graying distinctively around his sideburns. I wasn't close enough to hear every part of their exchange, but his tired face soon turned to anger.

He did not march up the stairs toward the boy though, he barged into the living room and picked up a phone and dialed a long distance number. The man was obviously the boy's father. I watched from the doorway while the mother sat down and observed from a couch. His face was furious as the call connected and he was just as furious when the phone picked up on the other side.

“What the hell did you fill my son's head with!” He shouted into the phone.

“Dear, please, my father didn't mean-”

“Quiet please.” He said calmly, politely to her before turning back to the phone, “Well?” He said, his words once again filled with anger. I couldn't hear what the old man was saying, but the father wasn't calming down so if I had to guess, he was just as unrepentant as the boy.

I looked away from the scene and saw that the boy had emerged from upstairs and was peeking around the corner beside me at the scene, but no doubt he too realized he could only hear half the conversation and that half was just yelling mostly. The boy had better sense than I did as I watched him quickly scamper off for another phone on the other side of the first floor. He quietly, carefully, picked it up, pressed the connect button and listened in. I knelt down beside him so I could hear as well.

“Calm down, Larry. So what happened?” I head the old man ask.

“_____ got into a fight. I certainly did not raise him that way! So what have you got to say about that? I know you filled his head with something.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yes, he is okay. A couple bruises and scrapes only. Now

answer the damn-"

"What about the other kids?"

I could hear the father curse under his breath before responding, "He broke another kid's nose-"

"Ha!" The old man laughed. "He won then, that's my grandson!"

"This is not a laughing matter! We did not send him up there with you so you could turn him into some barbarian!"

"When he came up at the start of summer he was beat up."

"He said he fell."

"He lied. Those kids he thrashed right and proper beat him up. I taught him what I know so that didn't happen again. Looks like it didn't."

"We do not solve our problems like that in this household!"

"You solve it by throwing money, right? That ain't how the world works all the time, Larry."

"A brute like you would think that."

"I don't wanna hear that kind of talk from a yellow dodger like yourself. You scared of a little jungle heat, boy? Thoughts of Nam make you shit yourself?"

The father's voice came by incredibly grave, "You listen here, Philip. If you think I'm sending my son back up to Alaska next summer, you're sorely mistaken. I only listened to my wife, your daughter because she was so insistent."

"Leave the boy out of this, Larry." The old man's voice rose through the other end of the line, threateningly.

"You just stay up there and out of our lives, or do you want to be put in a home?"

"Threatening an old man? A veteran? I'm sure your son would be proud of that. I'm more proud of what that boy has done with the years that he's lived than anything my son-in-law has accomplished in his whole life. He's more of a man you are."

"We're done here, Philip." The father said and then hung up the phone.

I had witnessed something a little heavy. I guess you could say I was remembering something a little heavy? I didn't feel like it was relevant to me. Everything I was watching seemed like I was watching someone else's problems. I watched the expression on the boy's face turn pale, even to him what was happening had to be obvious. I could hear the grandpa on the other side of the line mumbling and cursing regretfully and the boy perked up for a moment. The line was still open. If he was going to say anything, now would be the time. But I watched as the words got caught in the back of his throat.

"Come on. Say something!" I yelled at myself.

But my words didn't reach his ears. My hands passed through his shoulders when I tried to grab and shake them. I then heard a distinctive click as the other side of the line hung up and the dial tone rung out from the phone's speaker.

Once more my surroundings vaporized into mist, except the boy before me, I watched instead as the mist swirled around him as well. The mist swept over his features and body like sand and I watched him age and grow a few years before my eyes. When the mist pulled back he looked like me when I must have been about twelve years old. What had been his house just moments ago rebuilt as well, except this time it was not a house we were in, it looked more like a church. The boy's clothes changed into a black suit and the other people who started to materialize were likewise dressed in black.

The boy was sitting on a table off to the side where all manner of people, mostly old, were gathered and talking. On a billboard, a wide collection of photos had been gathered. Black and white and colored. They formed a time line of one person, one man. I spotted one that stuck out, a smiling man before a house with his arm wrapped around a beautiful woman who was also smiling.

So this was the funeral. The boy's... No, my grandfather's funeral. The look on the boy's face as he started at his feet kicking back and forth told me enough. I don't think in the four or five years that have passed since the last jump, he never did see or talk to his grandfather again. That was my interpretation of the oppressive feeling that was radiating from him. And that boy sat there all alone, until another very old man approached him. He was dressed in an old ceremonial military uniform and his chest was adorned with medals. He waited patiently with good posture for an old man until the boy finally looked up to acknowledge his presence.

The old man had a small wooden locked chest under his arm and he beamed the boy the best smile he could muster through his wrinkled face and thick glasses.

“You're _____, right? Larry's grandson?”

The boy only nodded.

“Larry left a lot of things to the Legion, but his will says this was supposed to go to you.”

The old man presented the wooden chest to the boy, which he, I, finally accepted with limp lethargic arms. The old man gave a polite salute as the boy looked up.

“I owe Larry a lot. A bunch of boys in 3rd Battalion wouldn't be here right now if not for him. You should be proud of that, being his grandson. He spoke a lot about you all the time and he wasn't much for words.”

I watched as two young children came up boisterously to the

old man and pulled at his pant legs.

"Grandpa!" The little boy called out.

"We're hungry," said the other little girl holding onto his other pant leg.

The old man ended his salute and put his hands on the children's shoulders and with a jovial chuckle led the two children away toward the refreshment table on the other side of the reception hall. I watched as the kid looked down at the box and his hands glide across the grooves in the wood. He then slid off the table to his feet and left the room behind. I followed him to an empty stairwell where he had sat down out of sight.

He fiddled with the combination lock on the front for about a minute before he seemed to remember the right series of numbers and the box clicked open. Inside the box was a letter. The kid pulled it out and opened it, folding out its contents and he began to read it.

Dear _____:

Once again, my name was indecipherable. It looked as though the letters making up what was my real name had melted into an ink blot. I ignored it and hurried to catch up with where I was reading.

If you're reading this letter, I was never able to talk to you again. While I regret that, I don't regret anything else. You don't need to feel too bad for me. I'm with Sarah now and we'll both be up here to look down on you. You can be proud of your old man, just like your old man is proud of you. If you haven't already, I want you to look under this letter before you read what else I have to say.

The boy looked under the letter and there laying beneath some old newspapers stuffing the box and making sure what else was in there didn't rustle or clunk around was an old medal and the old M1911A1 with three empty magazines next to it. The boy lifted the medal up and inspected it, what little light that shone into the dark corner glistening off of it. He unfolded the letter further and continued reading.

Out of all my children, in-laws and grandchildren, I can think of no one else to leave these to. You're a good shot, I'm sure my old friend here will be in good company with you. You got good so fast and I'm sure you'll be a crack shot with just a little regular practice. As for the medal, I don't need it where I'm going. I want you to have it. For valor and bravery, being a man and standing up for yourself even when it was hard. Even when no one thanked you for it or thought better of you for it. You did what you knew was right. Know that I'm proud of you for that and don't let anyone else make you think otherwise.

PS: I was lucky in life to find my own Princess. I'm with her

again at last, but I hope in heaven that you one day find your Princess Kim. I guess I lied earlier. There is a second thing I regret. That I wont live long enough to see my great-grandchildren.

Yours Sincerely: Grandpa Larry.

As I read the last few lines, the letter was quickly blotted and stained with water. Drops fell onto the page and smeared the ink a little and the hands holding onto it were shaking. The boy curled up behind the stairwell even more, clutching the letter and the old medal to his chest as he whimpered, alone.

***

I awoke suddenly and shot upright. I felt as though I was out of breath and I heaved painfully to suck the cold air in. There was darkness all around, but I felt the soft ground and warm blanket over me. High above was starlight, an alien array of stars and when I pinched my arm, I knew that I was no longer dreaming.

Tried as I might, I could not remember any details. My mind was fuzzy and I felt something empty in my chest. Like a jigsaw puzzle that was missing a portion of the whole, right in the middle of the picture. It was a different feeling of emptiness that plague me and my spotty memories before I crash landed in this odd world.

I couldn't quite get my breath back and soon I felt a weight upon my back and a pair of two soft objects rest on my head. A pair of powerful arms wrapped around me and they spread out to cover my whole body like another blanket. It wasn't wool, it was scales.

“Master, are you okay?” I heard Chris call out to me.

“I- I just had a dream that's all.”

“About 'grandpa'?” She asked. “Are you okay, Laven?”

“Grandpa? I don't know what you're talking about.”

“You were mumbling in your sleep.”

She was listening to-! No, this time of night she's on watch duty... That would be expected if she is doing her job and I was talking loudly in my sleep.

“It's okay, Laven. You can let it all out. I'm right here.”

“Let out wha-?”

I felt one of Chris' talons on her forearm wipe dangerously close to my eye. I wish she wouldn't, those things are really freaking sharp.

“You're crying. It's best you let it all out at a time like this, master.”

“I-I don't... Know what you're- t-talking abou-” I tried to say, but I felt something choke in the back of my throat.

I couldn't hold on any longer. Tears welled up in my eyes faster than I ever thought they could. They snuck up on me because I didn't even know what I was crying about. I couldn't even speak, my throat

dried up like a desert and the only noise that came out of my throat was a dry heave as my cheeks were soaked and caked in salt.

Chris swung around to my front, sat on her knees and pulled my head into her ample breasts. Her tail coiled around my back and she held onto me tightly, wrapping me in her wings, blocking the outside world. The talons of one of her wings pat and caressed the top of my head. They weren't even hands, so it was clumsy and hurt a bit, but it was comforting none the less.

I sat there for a while. I don't know how long. At some point, I fell asleep once more, but I didn't dream again that night.

Chapter 55

The sun hung high in the sky and the hustle and bustle of the market swarmed all around me. Countless voices echo in my ears in a boisterous chorus. The sweet smell of fruit, herbs and spices were in contest with the foul odor of livestock, spoiling meat and poor bathing hygiene. Thousands of people had crowded together at the week's end to sell their goods and wares and empty their purses of their hard earned coin. Even with current events as they were.

Everyone had gathered at the market again by force of habit alone. There were hushed conversations about the sinking of The Swift, the ship we four had stowed away on, which had disappeared beneath the waves of Lake Anthren. It wasn't the only ship and was one of two, so it wasn't doomsday for this city. Tremors of supply shortage would rumble forth in no time and that would be real damage caused by the catastrophe.

It happened a couple days ago, but there was still no public acknowledgment of its sinking. Its survivors had been scattered in all directions and washed up on all corners of the lake. Imperial officials must be trying to piece together what happened from testimonials because the rumors all pointed to betrayal within the Silver Bannermen guild and that worked for me. Although I was still carrying the scars of our escape with me. Underneath my clothes were layer upon layer of bandages and my hands looked liked gloves wrapped in white linen. I had nearly shed all the skin off the palms of my hands and my body could only take in so much of Susan's healing magic at a time. My nerves were still convinced the bones in my arms were still fractured and the muscles attached to them torn with the ligaments shredded. I only hoped to be back up to full health when the inevitable occurred.

I feared the four of us would take the blame. Between the truth that one of their own and our merry crew, it would be far more convenient a story that we sabotaged The Swift. I'm sure that day will arrive shortly, but right now we had finally hit a lucky break. The chaos was giving us a brief window of opportunity. A time to plan, gather supplies and execute our latest hair brained scheme. We would have to use the time before the wanted posters were plastered all over Anthren wisely.

The trade city of Anthren; a place big enough to lose yourself in and that's just what we intended to do. It's the biggest hub of activity this far north in the Empire. The lake, whose size must rival that of Lake Superior back home was a basin that several rivers and tributaries flowed to toward the west, east and north. Such is its importance; the city carries its name and the city is the lifeblood of the Northern Empire. It is also an important terminal for the Empire's

transportation highway. If we could get on it, we could have a straight shot at the Free Ports far to the south. No longer would we have to weave and dodge between the minor states composing the Empire.

Life seemed unfazed within the walls of this port city. Old stone buildings in every direction, banners and flags flapping in the wind all around. Ancient cobblestone streets which were lopsided from being worn down over centuries wound throughout the city. It put even Vilmheim and Domdracveria to shame with just how many people had been crammed into such a small space. And the relative but tepid calm was just a testament to the hard times this city must have endured throughout the years.

We had been sneaking through the woods for so long and time seemed so slow with each and every day a stressful race against time that I had almost forgotten the feel of a city. It would take some serious string pulling to stop a cart once it was set in motion, so I'm told. I'm really starting to question my sources though... Standing next to me, hunched over, with her tail wagging and salivating at a stall with a wide assortment of freshly squeezed and wrapped sausage, was Rose. Her eyes were sparkling and the pudgy old man tending the stand worked rolling and stuffing more sheep intestines with a nervous look on his face. The stars sparkling in Rose's eyes and the radiant aura surrounding her betraying her intentions as she watched man's hands work.

“Rose?” I asked.

No response. I looked at the man who looked at me and shrugged with a crooked professional smile on his face.

“Rose. If you're going to buy any, can you hurry it up?”

“Five lengths of pork and two of beef? Or three lengths of pork and three of beef? I can't decide!... Maybe two pork, one beef and two mutton?” She spoke to herself.

I was starting to feel bad for the stall owner, Rose's fiery tail whipping back and forth was making quite a wide bubble of space around us. If the poor man wasn't currently terrified I'm sure he'd be upset.

“What do you want, Laven?” She asked with her eyes glistening, still fixated on the spread before her.

I looked at the poor man tending the shop and he looked at me. Behind that professional smile his eyes were begging me, 'please do something, sir.' I looked back at Rose who was concentrating very hard, leaping through hoops of whatever mental calculus was churning inside her head to make the best decision. That melancholic expression on her face was a world apart from the image of her tearful face that was now flooding my mind.

Are you just playing the part, Rose? For our sake? For my

sake?

"How about three of each for the same price? Bulk sale discount?"

The man looked at me horrified. Rose looked up at me at last, the spell over her having been broken. She looked at me with awe and glistening eyes. I looked back at the man with a crooked smile and he looked down left and right but slumped his shoulders in the end.

"For you sir... madam... of course."

Rose let out a squeal of joy as she let clatter a handful of silver and bronze coins and in return lifted nine rope like lengths of sausage. She wore two of them around her shoulders and the third like a scarf, so that she could gnaw at one as we walked away with our bargain. Even in the midst of the crowd people gave us plenty of room, I don't think I've had to brush shoulders with anyone since we had arrived. I suppose it was thanks to the blazing inferno sweeping back and forth behind Rose.

I still couldn't get those images of Rose out of my mind. Standing among all the broken bodies and surrounded by an inferno. Digging her claws into me as she buried her face into my chest and crying. Twirling and spinning in front of me as we walked together with a wide smile on her face and her hearty laughter as she slapped me around playfully, like a classic tomboy. I couldn't compartmentalize them, they all blended together and I couldn't make sense of it. Just what was this girl feeling? What was she hiding?

Now that she had a snack she was happily chewing away on like a dog with a bone, her tail was burning even brighter. She wasn't even really eating though. She seemed more content on gnawing on it, savoring the tension of the skin, letting the hickory flavor stew in her drool. She was completely oblivious that the prices in the city have quite blatantly inflated. Quite dramatically at that. Even after I gouged the poor butcher, we still had to pay at least three times the normal price. I suppose it was to be expected given the expected squeeze on supply, but I do really think this girl just doesn't understand money at all. When she does decide to use it, she throws it around without a second thought. What she had spent more than half our money on was starting to dig at me though.

I simply couldn't hold off asking her any longer, "We're supposed to be out here to gather supplies, but all we've bought is meat."

Rose stopped chewing for a second to grace me with a response, "mwha chu ean?"

That must have been a herculean task given how focused and intent she was on eating, but she still couldn't be bothered to stop eating.

“Don't speak your mouth full.”

With a quick snap of her razor sharp teeth that viciously tore the sausage in her mouth to pieces instantly she tilted her head as her sausage scarf swung down and hung like a necklace.

I sighed, “What I'm saying is: Why don't we pick up some bread, fruits and vegetables while we're at it?”

“No need!” Rose declared. “Meat has all the nutrients you could ever want. Since what is meat, was once alive and ate all that stuff for us.”

“I don't think it works that way Rose.”

“Nonsense! I am a firm believer in the essential food groups. Worked for me all my life”

“I'm not sure I even want to-”

She thrust both her claws in my face started holding up her talons one by one, “Red meat, white meat, seafood, bone marrow, gizzards and fat. All the essential food groups for a balanced diet.”

She is the one carrying the money after all, so she gets to decide what to buy. Plus, I don't think I have the mental fortitude to get her to think any different. The best I had, is compromise.

“How about a thing or two that wont spoil in a day or two?” I suggested.

I wasn't expecting the confounded look on her face she gave me. She titled her head, staring at me with her eyes wide and her brow knitted together.

“We can't keep all that meat cold and preserved for long, you know?”

Her expression didn't change.

“You've.... You have never actually seen meat spoil, have you?” I said as the truth dawned upon me.

“Laven.... You're a smart guy, but sometimes you say the weirdest things.”

Coming from Rose, that hurt. A lot. I felt like I needed to sit down. I guess I was going to have to endure more nights of meat sweats. All this wandering around shopping, grazing and ordering to have a ridiculous amount of meat sent to our lodgings almost distracted me from the other reason we're out here. To save myself I quickly changed the topic.

“So I take it that wasn't the front we're looking for?”

“'ront wha? Rose said, mumbling after sneaking another sausage to chew on while I wasn't looking.

I came to a sudden stop and Rose did as well, once again wearing an innocent expression on her face.

I had to keep my voice down as people were meandering all around us, “The front for the guys running the smuggling ring.”

Her expression didn't change.

"The guys you said helped get you to the north in the first place? The ones you said can get us on the highway again?"

My impatience was slipping through, not that thick headed Rose noticed. She rolled her eyes upward and went deep into thought before I could nearly hear the ding coming from her head as a light bulb went off.

"No. I was just hungry."

I pursed my lips and let out a long growl in the back of my throat, in an attempt to drown the scream. We had just spent twenty minutes in front of that sausage stand... I kept my cool thinking we were just being nonchalant. I had to do my best to stay cool and not lose my temper. Taking deep breaths to stop myself from exploding.

Was this girl really for real? This salamander? A lizardman borne of fire. A girl deathly afraid of water. Any large body of water. The girl who had to psyche herself up, not just to throw herself off a cliff, but just to brave the water of the river below it. The girl who'd rather storm a fortress than try paddling her way across an even larger river. A girl who would rather take on a small army than be stuck in a tiny little boat floating on water without land anywhere in sight. I want to ask, but there are more immediate problems at hand.

"We're on a tight schedule here, Rose. We're safe for now, but I don't know how long that's gonna last. We can't just waste time like-"

"Relax, Laven!" She said and slapped me hard on the back.

I felt the tremors from the place of impact spread throughout my body and every nerve of mine screamed in protest. It had only been a couple days ago, I pushed my body in order to hold up a hundred kilograms of boat and monster for almost half a minute. Susan had healed my bones, but my muscles, tendons and nerves were still sensitive, damaged and weary. Rose doesn't know the meaning of holding back, so long story short, it hurt like hell. She followed it up with a second and a third and I almost fell over into the cobblestone. She merely laughed joyously and oblivious the whole time.

"Lavy you must learn to let things be," She lectured me. "Because the truth is, I forget where it is."

I think I really need to sit down now. But as though she had said nothing particularly special or ground breaking, she started carrying on her merry way. Thankfully the bandages were deadening my sense of pain like a great big aspirin patch over my entire body. What I really needed right now was one of those things wrapped around my head.

"We're good for a couple days, so let it go. Don't worry, be happy! We're here now and alive! Don't go looking a gift hearse in the

mouth.” She said wagging her index talon in my face.

I had to rub my temples and I heaved a great sigh. Horse, Rose. That's gift horse. You're butchering of idioms with macabre connotations and it wasn't helping my stress levels right now. Just when I was regaining my composure to speak my mind, I felt a tight grip around my wrist along with another one of Rose's excited squeals. The nerves in my arm screamed in protest as I was dragged along to yet another stall.

This time however, a soothing chill wind washed over me, making my whole body feel like it was being wrapped in a cold compress that soothed my frayed nerves and creaking bones. I shook my head and refocused my vision to see we were both standing before a small and quaint cart. Mist like breath on a cold day billowed from several barrels built into the top of the cart and standing behind it was a woman with a warm motherly smile. Her hair was a long and straight pale green and her skin was blue, like a frozen corpse's. Her dull blue eyes which gave a warm feeling despite the chilly aura her body gave off left the impression she was anything but a corpse. The woman's clothing was unlike the other patrons in the market place plaza as well, although it appeared she wasn't getting too much business.

The woman dressed in a red flower motif yukata with a crystal snowflake shaped clip in her hair bowed deeply and graciously. Rose stared at the good she had oohing and awing and I politely nodded to the woman. She was a monster. No doubt about it. I had seen a few of them walking about, but didn't pay much attention to them because neither did the other people in the marketplace. Monsters weren't common, but they still had wares to sell and people were willing to buy them, but you could taste the apprehension in the air. Not everyone seemed comfortable standing nearby for long. Maybe that was why this poor woman's stand seemed to be flagging so badly.

I looked down and saw inside three barrels three, colors: white, red and blue. It had a very familiar looking texture of them. Some sort of emulsion process, fluffy and soft but chilled and nearly solid.

“Ice cream.” I said aloud.

“Why, yes sir.” The woman said a little surprised. “My own personal recipe.”

This is the kind of thing I wouldn't expect at all. We're a few centuries behind refrigeration- of course, the woman is some kind of ice monster. It couldn't be that difficult. I looked down at Rose who was still looking on amazed and once again drooling slightly.

“Too bad you're on your all meat diet, Rose.”

“Dairy is a sometimes food!” She retorted, pouting as she looked back up at me. “It comes from an animal, so it still counts!”

“Holstaurus.” The woman said kindly. “Good for the bones.

Vitality...” She flipped out a paper fan from her yukata's sleeve and covered her mouth, “Vigor.” She said suggestively while looking at me.

“Holstaurus?” I asked. “What's a-”

“We'll take two! One red one white.” Rose said dropping a clatter of coins in front of the ice woman.

“Hold on now, what's a Holstaurus?”

No one seemed to be paying attention to me anymore as Rose watched the woman intently while she produced two crystal bowls and scooped two large blobs of white and red iced cream, one for each bowl. With a finishing touch, she stabbed each with a small spoon and handed them over to Rose's waiting claws.

“'Thank you for your patronage.” She said while bowing deeply. “Please, leave the bowls on the side when you are finished.”

Rose thrust the bowl with the white cream at me and when I tentatively took it from her, she quickly went to work on the apple sized blob. I took a more reserved approach and cautiously scooped one small teaspoon sized bite. It was cold, but that goes without saying. The taste was nostalgic though. Somehow better. A natural organic kind of taste, free from excess sugar and preservatives. The creamy texture was still there though, the crystallized fat and lumps of natural sugar. It separated and clung together just like ice cream alright. I couldn't stifle a small smile, the little things that remind you of home, huh?

“mmmmm!” Rose moaned beside me.

The entirety of her portion was already gone and her face was scrunched up as she rubbed a palm against the side of her head. She looked like she was in pain.

I berated her, “Why would you eat it all at once like that?”

“Cold!” She whined. “Cant.... Brain... Frozen!”

“Yeah yeah, I guess I should have known to warn you about that...”

The woman behind the cart was holding her yukata sleeve in front of her face while her shoulders shook. She peered over at the two of us every so often, taking great delight in watching the two of us. When Rose started stamping her foot on the ground, I knew it was time to intervene.

“Hold your tongue up against the top of your mouth. Rub it back and forth against the hard and soft palate.”

I could see her tongue poke at her cheeks as she did just that and slowly the pained expression on her face faded away and she opened her eyes and looked at me in awe. She flashed me a great big smile, ear to ear... fin to fin more like it. There was something... disarming about that smile. A knot in my heart just seemed to melt away. There was something so pure and simple about that smile. I

couldn't dig anything out of that if I tried. Maybe that was the root of them problem right there. It wasn't a problem with Rose that was eating me up. It was what I was projecting onto Rose. So she's not perfect. Rose gets scared like anyone else. She might be a brilliant fighter, but she's still just a fool all the same. The more I thought, the more I tried to understand, I was just painting her with my own insecurities and worries. I felt like a great weight was lifting off my shoulders.

When I looked at her again with a clearer heart and mind I saw her ravenous devouring of that ice cream left a bit on her cheek.

"Rose, you got some on you."

I said while wiping the red blob off with a finger. It tasted like cherry. Wait. What? While the feeling of cold cherry and milk cream melted on my tongue I furrowed my brows. I pulled my finger from my mouth and looked at Rose, whose smile had gone and she was looking at me with a flushed face. A face that was, would I dare say, embarrassed.

"My my..." The ice woman behind the cart cooed.

What the hell was I thinking?

"ha-ha-ha-ha." Rose laughed weakly. "Laven, why you-" She said as she slid forward to slap me hard on my back.

Rose broke out laughing, but her voice was still tinge with embarrassment as her voice cracked a little. Each slap got a little harder each time until the last one was hard enough to bend me over. I almost fell forward and onto my face. Before that, I almost face planted into the rest of my ice cream. I only just held it off to the side fast enough. I could feel each individual vertebra in my spine crack as I slowly righted myself once again. Like a robot slowly activating, I was like the Tin Man needing a good dose of oil to fight the rust. My mood almost soured instantly. Almost.

Rose looked up at me and stopped laughing for a second. She smiled mischievously.

"Hold still." She said.

She walked up to me, stood on the tips of her talons and her face shot up toward my own. I felt the warm press of her lips for just a moment. Her tongue licked my cheek and with that warmth, I felt the spot of cool in contrast. She then backed away, even redder than before, but when she looked up at me again her cheeks puffed out and she broke down laughing.

"Laven! Your face... Your face!" She laughed while holding onto her sides, almost falling over and rolling on the ground. "Your redder than I am!"

I held my hand up to my cheek where it was still a little wet. A bit of saliva, a little bit of left over white iced cream. Though the

bandages, through the scars and missing flesh, I felt warmth. The chill spring air was brushed aside by the heat radiating off my body. I was flushed. Completely red. The heat made its way to my heart which curled and twisted in on itself. Churning into a knot, but feeling light and rising upwards.

It rose up into my throat and I let out a weak cough. A domino effect caused the corners of my mouth to peel back into a smile and I started chuckling myself. I couldn't hold back the laughter. I started to peter out when I noticed all the stares of the passersby. Rose seemed oblivious and kept laughing, but she too was becoming redder and redder, more flushed by the second. Scratching her cheek with her index talon. She looked off to the side for a second and then jerked her head in the other direction robotically.

"H-hey look! An auction for fresh whole sirloin. Wait here Laven."

She awkwardly marched away before I could get a word in and escaped through the crowd toward the sound of a man blabbering incoherently somewhere in the crowd far away. The market place once again swirled all around me, but everything felt as though it had gotten very quiet. I quickly removed myself from a chaos and found some crates and barrels to use as a makeshift bench and rest my weary feet.

"Good morrow, sir. Do you require your fortune told?" A voice called out to me just as I was unwinding.

Another person and emerged from the crowd in front of me. Draped in a black cloak and cowl, long black locks of hair hanging down from the cowl. However, I couldn't ever mistake that voice.

"So it was you Rose saw. Susan."

"Hmph." The disguised Anubis snorted. "I really wish you would cease referring to me as such while unaccompanied by the others."

"Force of habit." I said shrugging.

Susan still in her disguise sat down next to me, the hem of her cloak revealing her feet dangling in the air. Her disguise was improving. Human feet wrapped in sandals and normal hands, four fingers one thumb as she laid them to rest on her lap. The way she was sitting, her tail seemed to be missing as well, but she still refused to take off the cowl.

"Can't disguise the ears, I take it?"

"I have improved my methods, but illusions and transmogrification spells are only so effective. I believe I have stretched my powers to their limit. Hiding my arms, legs and tail is within the bounds of reason, but my ear canals are not on the sides of my head."

She said while pushing a finger to the top of her head, the

sensitive hairs within her jackal like ears reacting on reflex and twitching underneath the cloth.

"Unlike humans, they sit upon the top of my head. Altering the base skeletal structure and skull has proven impossible." She said sighing. "The concentration required for such a feat also greatly reduces my powers, such a form would be a fatal hindrance to my everyday activities and responsibilities."

"Is that so?" I said halfheartedly staring back into the crowd. "So you're saying the disguise can never be perfect?"

"Yes. I know of monsters who are capable of disguising themselves perfectly, but they must have natural talent or a greater reserve of power than I." Susan said, hanging her head. "I fear my form may be mistaken for a lycanthrope and only cause you problems."

"A werewolf?"

"Correct."

I looked out over the crowd. Most of them were indeed humans. The ice woman certainly looked human and it seems her business was doing better now after our little display. There were the occasional sore thumb sticking out of the crowd though.

"Seems pretty lively still. Not sure why you were so persistent."

"Lycanthropes have a less than savory repute. They rove in packs and attack indiscriminately. Capturing men and afflicting women with lycanthropy. Thereby increasing the size of their pack. To see one wander inside human settlements freely would cause great concern and undue attention. A lizardman is by for more welcome, they have a reputation for being reserved. Their attacks of men are far and few between and their targets more... selective and solitary than most monsters."

"You're starting to come off a little jealous." I said with a chuckle.

"I-I am most certainly not jealous! Rose just so happened to be the most suited for this mission! Even then her irresponsibility is incurable. She catches sight of me for just a moment and she runs off on her own... With that look on her face." Susan trailed off almost unheard.

"We're pretty high strung and paranoid about now..." I lamented. "We even stuck Chris on perimeter duty."

"News from the north is seen as ill wind here. The meek princess Violetta erodes away each and every day. The Dragon, symbol of avarice and power, takes hold and fears of Domdracverian aggression mount every day. Ancient land claims spread in all directions from that old kingdom, the mountains only its crown. A

wyvern is the symbol of that kingdom's power. Chris would only draw unwanted attention and suspicion."

"'Wings aloft in the skies above, worry not master for the eyes of justice see all?' Was how she put it, didn't she?" I said quoting Chris.

Susan sighed, "I wish she would understand the gravity of our situation and spare us. Although splitting ourselves stresses us all, we must keep as low a profile as possible. And for Rose's sake..." She said trailing off again.

"So you let Rose run rampant today for her sake?"

"W-wha what?" Susan said jumping from her seat a little.

"You might not hear how loud you're talking with your ears covered like that, but you're certainly not whispering."

Susan buried her face inside her cowl in embarrassment.

"Besides, she's fine."

Susan froze stock-still, "What?" She said coldly.

"I don't blame you, I thought the same until just about now, but she's moved on. She's pretty admirable like that-"

"That little harlot..." She menaced while cracking her knuckles into fists.

"Are you alright?"

"A-anyways," She blustered. "I came here for a reason! Your hand, present it! I must check up on how your wounds are healing."

"Right here? Right now?"

"There is nothing curious about a fortune teller conducting a common a palm reading, is there not?"

I shrugged. There wasn't, I suppose. I pulled out the loose strand of the bandage around my left hand and slowly unwrapped it. With each layer, the very air and gentle wind stung. I had to clench down hard when I reached the final layer and exposed the burnt flesh. Red scars, burn marks from friction burns which had seared and torn the skin off my palms. My fingers twitched involuntarily as the nerves came back to life and picked up every pin prick of pain. From her sleeve, Susan's small feminine hands slowly and gently caressed over my fingers. She was delicate, careful and professional.

"I believe the worst has passed. There appears to be no infection and the scars are healing over. A week of further treatment and I can heal the scars and damaged tendons and nerves. Now, the other hand."

This time Susan's hands unwrapped my right hand and inspected it the same way. Gently moving her fingers over the damaged flesh. Her small hand pressed up against my right palm rubbed a palm the wrong way and my hand seized up and clenched on its own. My fingers roughly mingled her own and our hands tangled.

Susan jumped, but she didn't pull away. I tried to apologize but she reached out with her other hand and tried to wrap it around our closed fists. Her free hand then slowly caressed up my arm toward my face where her tanned fingers rubbed my cheek. She lifted her head up high enough that I could see underneath her cowl and her red eyes underneath, quivering and seductive. I felt the familiar feeling of being flushed again as her face got closer and closer. Then all of a sudden she stopped, the ears hidden underneath her cowl twitching noticeably.

"Tsk, worst possible timing." Susan chided.

"W-what?" I blustered.

"Wrap your hands again properly, Laven." She said as she reluctantly let go of my hand, got up and moved to disappear back into the crowd. "I'll be nearby and watching. And do tell that idiot to hurry it up. We don't have all day."

With the sting of air as enough of a reminder I quickly went to work to bandage my hands again and not long after Susan submerged backed into the crowd, Rose emerged with a large hunk of side rib over her shoulder, butcher's hook and all.

"La~ven~!" She said smiling ear to ear. "Look at the size of it- What's up with your hands?"

I paused for a moment, but kept wrapping them, "Just giving them some air to breathe." I said making up an excuse.

"Hmmmm? Anyways, Let's go. I remembered something."

Best news I had heard all day.

"Really?" I said, unable to hide my excitement.

"Well.... Some people who will know."

Good enough. It was past noon now and we had already wasted a better part of today's daylight. I got back up with Rose who found a couple of young boys who for just a couple coppers take her gains back to our room. I followed the salamander as she strode with purpose near the outskirts of the market. Through the alleys overpopulated with stray cats, dogs and the down trodden. It wasn't the safest or highest class place in the city. That much was obvious, but I'd feel bad for the one trying to mess with Rose on a mission.

We arrived at a door which led to a cellar. An odd and out of the place for one. A sign was over the door, a barrel and wine glass, but the runes underneath it were still undecipherable to me.

"Alright, hang tight. I'm gonna go ask some 'questions'."

How she said that worried me a little.

"Hold up, I'll be right behind-"

Rose held her claw up to me, "No. It's safer out here. I'm gonna need some 'elbow room' too."

Now I'm worried.

Rose descended the steps and pushed past the door and I was left in the alley way, alone. The sounds of the market echoed their way off the stone walls even this far, but the sound of barking dogs and mewling cats was just a little louder. The cough of the weak and sick and the bawling of a baby filled the area with a repressive feeling that I simply did not belong here. As though this place was trying to reject me. A sight of the terrible underbelly of this great and impressive city.

"Under the foot of tyranny, in the arch of its boot, the lost and forgotten squalor and rot away." A voice monologue above me.

I flinched and looked up to see Chris hanging upside down just above me. Her talons dug into the windowsill, hanging there like a bat. When I noticed her, she grinned and let go, the wood cracking and breaking while she somersaulted through the air and landed gently on the ground in front of me. She barely made a sound doing so, despite what you'd expect from a girl her size. The windowsill less so. The wood clattering and splintering on the dirt behind her, a couple potted plants with flowers and herbs inside now decorating the ground. She seemed oblivious to it. Even when a voice came from the window above, lamenting over his broken window and lost 'herbs'.

Chris knelt before me as she gave her report, "Master, all is quiet and peaceful. Enemies: Zero. Opponents to justice: Cowering in fear."

"Yeah yeah, it's been really peaceful, Chris. Thank you."

"And you, Laven?" She spoke seriously for once.

It caught me off guard.

"What are you talking about?"

"Laven's mind wanders at times like these. Your mind is also troubled, torn. I, as your servant, professes concern."

"Really I have no idea what-"

Chris seized my hand in her wings and held on tightly. At least as tight as she could with no actual hands.

"You toss and turn in your sleep. Speaking of names and places I have no knowledge of. They bring you to tears and tear your heart asunder. I fear your mind is troubled. Our battles will only become more dire as we delve deeper into the heart of darkness. If you are not whole, I fear for your safety."

Dreams? What dreams? I haven't the slightest idea what Chris is talking about. But as weird as she is, she only misunderstands or stretches the truth. She never lies.

"The Dark Wing Drake awaits in your corner. Fear not the darkness for whatever clouds conspire to blot out the sun and moon with fear, I will carry us above them, to the light of truth."

Now she's getting all dramatic again. Like a scene out of an old mobster film, she then reverently kissed the back of my hand in place

of a ring. I have no idea what brought this on, but when she looked up at me and smiled I felt her sincerity, beyond all her posturing and theatrics pierce me. I couldn't help but smile back and roll with it. Chris clumsily let go of my hand and stood tall, looking down at me and pounded her wing across her chest and I saluted back.

"What's going on here?" Rose's voice chimed in, her head just visible from the stairs she descended before.

"Rose? Your back. That was faster than I expected."

"You talking with someone?" She asked.

"What? Yeah with Chris right- What the fu-?"

Chris was standing in front of me just now and she was gone just like that. How the hell does someone that tall just up and vanish like that?

"Anyways. I ask around and I remember where to go now."

"Finally. About time we-

I said, but was interrupted by moans of pain from the open door down below. A meek cry of help from another voice called out weakly afterwards. Rose climbed the stairs and stood in front of me, her claw behind her back as she rocked innocently on her heels.

"Rose?"

"Yeah?"

"What did you-"

"Asked a few questions. Got answers."

"What kind of-?"

Now I was smelling something burning.

"Come on Laven. 'We don't have all day' don't we?" She said mimicking my voice.

I noticed there was another spot of red on her face.

"You got something on your face." I said.

Rose quickly rubbed her claw over her cheek then rubbed it on the wall next to her.

"Oh, that's not mine."

"Then from where-?"

"Tripped."

"What?"

"Someone tripped."

"Someone tripped, cut themselves and bled on you?"

"Yeah. Like that."

"Your right knuckle also has-"

"Come on Laven! Daylight is bur- wasting! Nothing's burning, only wasting away. Time that is, not anyone!"

Rose grabbed hold of my arm which once again screamed in pain at almost being pulled from its socket once again and my wrist feeling like would crumple at any point. Not that Rose noticed. And run

we did, winding through the alleys and back into the square. She ran with purpose, with a glint in her eyes. I know that glint, I've seen it enough times before.

For what seemed like the first time today, we raced off somewhere with actual purpose until we reached a very unsuspecting shop. A general store and pawn shop all in one. I immediately thought of a fence. Not quite a smuggler, but close enough. If I wasn't so suspicious already, I guess anyone else would think the place is legit. Perhaps we walked by it earlier today and thought nothing of it. Rose didn't seem to have a plan in mind, we simply burst through the front entrance a bell chiming as it was brushed aside by the door.

"Good after-" The clerk greeted us, almost.

He froze when he saw Rose. Were monsters not a frequent patron of this place. Or.... Anyways, his eyes darted between Rose and myself. He was a young man, no real defining features on his face, but tattoos running down his sleeveless arms. A mop of unkempt black hair on his head and dressed in typical shopkeeper attire. He certainly looked the part, if not belaying a more active and perhaps troubled youth.

Rose walked up to the desk and slammed her claws down on the counter. The man in the apron didn't flinch, much to his credit.

"Three crates of bolts. The troll refuses to leave the old bridge." She said knowingly.

Was that some kind of code? It had to be. The man must have known it himself. But he barely budged at all.

"I don't know what you're talking about, miss." The man said.

"Yeah, you do. And get your hands off the dagger." Rose threatened.

The man looked at Rose, then back to me.

"Laven. Step back." Rose warned me.

The man's eyes then turned to the door and back to Rose, but when he looked over again his brows furrowed as I saw a woman dressed in a black cloak and cowl push the door aside. Susan had arrived at last and blocked the exit. The man clicked his tongue, relaxed his arms, but then stomped his foot instead.

I heard a floor board crack, a hiss which was then followed by an explosion of dust. Rose leapt back and covered her mouth and eyes with one arm, reaching for her sword on her back with her claw. Susan did the same as she materialized her golden staff and her artificial human features faded away and were replaced with her monstrous limbs and tail that snuck out from behind her.

The wave of dust washed over me and I raised my arms to protect myself, but I soon saw that wasn't the point. The man had cleared across the store, through the shelves and items on display to a

rear entrance. A rug had been torn aside to reveal a door that was hidden before. His hand was already on the handle by the time the three of us had spotted him and it dawned on all of us that we were too far away to do anything. As the man slammed down on the handle, the door responded in kind and slammed him in the face. A loud crack bang of wood ripped and tore through the tiny shop as the door the man had been trying to open splintered into dozens of pieces.

The clerk was thrown forward, knocking over his inventory and landing in a heap, sprawled out on the floor as a greet green mass duck down to enter into the room. Chris nearly caught her horns on the frame, but lumbered inside.

“Hey guys, there's a whole hidden alleyway behind this place too. Completely cut off from everything else. Door was locked though, no handle either. But no door can stop the Dark Wing- What happened here?” Chris said, being somehow surprised at the mayhem she caused.

The clerk was rolling on the floor, clutching his sides, his back resting on several broken objects of varying value and sharpness. When he finally opened his eyes, he froze in terror as the four of us circled around him, looming over him, watching him.

“Well.” I said. “I think that settles it. We're exactly where we need to be.”

Chapter 56

Hidden from the sun and from the good people of the city was this sordid hideaway, a refuge for criminals. The alley has been long forgotten, the connections to the streets had been walled off long ago and the windows overlooking it were shuttered ages ago. Moldy old crates and empty rotting barrels littered both sides of the only path from the stop to an imposing steel door. It was the only thing around that looked less than a decade ago. A missing layer of grime and dust gave the evidence of its recent use.

I breathed deeply to center myself, but not so deeply as the poor clerk standing in front of the door. I watched from the right of the door frame as beads of sweet were collecting on his forehead and his raspy breaths wheezed. On the left side, opposite of me, Chris was waiting in position, watching the clerk carefully and with disdain. Far off into the distance, around a bend in the alley, I saw Susan's tail wag while she was waiting around the corner watching the only entrance into the alley. Behind the clerk, with just a small enough frame to disappear behind him, was Rose with the tip of her longsword poking ever so gently into the man's back.

I gave a thumbs up to Susan in the distance and then a nod to Rose who jabbed the point into the man's back and prodded him forward. The clerk didn't need much cajoling; he was shaking, but he raised his fist and knocked on the heavy steel door five times in a row, the timing was peculiar, but no doubt had a purpose to it.

“Yeah yeah!” A muffled voice called out from behind the door.

I heard the sound of sliding metal and a faint torch light shine from the other side of the door. A small sliding view port at eye level no doubt.

“What is it? I ain't got notice about anyone coming about now.”

A lack of any reaction from him meant that Rose's crazy idea to hide behind him was working. My heart beat slowed down, but only slightly.

“F-from” The man stuttered and Rose jabbed him in the back again, causing him to jump. “From Micklemerry Farm, Jon.” The clerk said.

He was still shaking pretty badly and I'm not sure if jabbing him in the back was going to help. Anything would have to do to though. Anything to get him from looking suspicious and alerting the man on the other side of the door.

“Pat, what in the bloody hells are you talking about? Micklemerry what?”

“Micklemerry Farm where the cows have yet to come home.” 'Pat' hissed through his teeth.

“Cows what?” 'Jon' said soundly utterly confused on the other side. “If this is about you havin' to take the double shift up front, you were the one who said, 'double or nothing' on the last hand. So deal with it.”

“Cows have yet to come home!” Pat was nearly yelling now.

A jab of Rose's sword into his back made him quiet down real quick. I was starting to doubt this was some secret 'open sesame'. I nearly sprang into action, but my eyes glanced over at Chris who was already gazing at me, waiting for my attention. She gave a smile and a nod, as though I was supposed to understand what that meant. I relaxed and slid back into position.

Chris covered her mouth with one of her wings, “I said cows you fat stupid oaf!”

I barely recognized the voice that came out slightly muffled. It wasn't her usual deep bellowing voice she soliloquized with, it was much deeper. Perhaps even indistinguishable from the clerk's if it was muffled thoroughly enough because of that thick steel door.

“What in the hells did you say to me?” The 'fat stupid oaf' yelled from the other side.

The view port slammed shut with a clank and when the clerk tried to shout out, I could hear the guy's muffled swearing on the other side and Rose was on the ball and clasped her claw over our prisoner's face. She held his jaw shut with brute force and muffled his screams in her palm, he probably wouldn't hear friend over his own cursing. I could hear the sounds of locks coming undone and I watched as the blood drained from the clerk's face. There was an odd mixture of terror and exasperation on his face and by the time it wore off and he came back to his senses, it was far too late.

The door opened inwards ever so slightly, the clerk tried to yell something, more like curse and swear, but Chris was faster than the man on the other side and as soon as the locks were out-of-place, she swung around from the side and slid her right foot in the crack. When the door tried to suddenly swing back shut, it got caught on her foot and even the door's weight couldn't dent the thickness of those scales. With her powerful forearms, Chris pushed against the door. The poor bastard on the other side didn't stand a chance. I could hear him scream as the steel door swung back the other way and sent him sprawling across the floor.

Rose prodded the clerk onward and into the hideout while I gave a wave to Susan off in the distance who then quickly made her way over. When I entered, I saw Chris' right talon wrapped around the neck rather pudgy and ugly looking gentleman sprawled on the floor.

“Where is he?” Chris growled in a deep voice at the man.

“What? Who?” The man asked, rather justifiability terrified, for clarification.

“Who What? That isn't a name I've ever heard before!” Chris hissed back at the man pinned to the ground.

“Chris, don't bully the goons. They probably aren't paid enough as is.” I said. “Just tie them up and lock the door behind us.”

While the two criminals were struggling on the ground I looked around and saw a row of crossbows lined up on the wall beside the door in addition to another slot in the door which had been invisible from the outside. One that could be pulled back and open a firing port at hip level. A nasty surprise for sure for anyone that wasn't supposed to be here. The decor was otherwise utilitarian, but it certainly wasn't ill kept. Everything was clean. This place had been renovated rather painstakingly or the outside was kept looking as shoddy as it was for camouflage.

“This entrance is not nearly ancient enough to house any meaningful enchantments,” Susan said while tracing her paws over its surface.”

“Can you get us at least an hour?”

“With sufficient brute force or capabilities in disenchantment, it will fail instantly.”

“And if they don't? An hour?”

“Perhaps.” Susan said sighing as her claws tracing the steel and leaving behind luminescent white glyphs.

Reinforcements were a bigger worry for me than guaranteeing our escape, but I was still troubled that it had to come to this. We would be entering the lion's den in a couple of minutes and we've spent the last half-day banging pots and pans outside its lair and just now we've escalated to stomping on its tail to get its attention. There are things I fear more than another crime boss though. It's depressing to think this is perhaps the least suicidal of all the options we have on the table.

While Susan was making the finishing touches on the seal for the door, Rose was finishing up trying the wrists and ankles of the two goons together and leaving them laying on the floor. They squirmed and protested and the fat oaf finally looked up and took a good look at me for the first time as I stared back down at him.

“Who the hell do you think you are? You're gonna regret thi-”

Rose's sword slammed down into the wood, right in front of the man's face. He went rigid with fright as Rose squat down to give the guy a dirty look.

“Y-you don't realize who you're messing with.” His friend

spoke up in his defense.

I stepped forward and squat down next to Rose and looked the two of them in the eyes.

“We wanted to do this the proper way, but your friends made it difficult. Now we come here and you make it just as difficult. I want to talk to your boss and I'm not going to accept a 'no' or a 'maybe later'.”

“You ain't got nothing on us! Boss has got all the right papers and connections. He'll get you hanged for this!”

“The Lion will eat you alive!” His friend spoke up in confidence.

“The lion is... busy...” The oaf said pensively.

“Busy?” His eyes widened with what I suspected was fright. “He's busy. You definitely can't go in.”

“Ah!” Rose yelped. “The Lion, now I remember. Xavier. Xavier Telmenk.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose in exasperation.

“Rose, we just had to break down their front door and NOW you remember who we're supposed to be asking for?”

She knocked her fist against the side of her head and gave me a razz of her tongue in response. It wasn't all that unexpected. I'm not sure if I feel worse about how it turned out, or that I'm not surprised it turned out this way.

“Wha-? How the hell does she know-” The oaf tried to say, surprised.

“Shuddap!” The clerk yelled interrupting him.

The secret behind Lion's moniker was out, but I suppose I couldn't blame him for trying to prevent his friend from confirming it for us.

“How in the hells does she- Hold on... Wait, you don't think she's actually...”

“-The Thorn Knight?” The oaf said ominously.

“The others then- Then he is-”

“That's right.” I said with a wicked grin as they laid their eyes on me. “This isn't a routine visit from your 'friends'. I got a deal to make with your boss, and if you want to keep this non violent, just warn me about any other surprises.”

“The Lion ain't got time for-”

“Shut up shut up shut up! The Lion WILL know whatever ya say.”

I sighed and stood up, “Alright then, let's go. Time isn't on our side.”

“Hey! Even if you are them, you really don't know who you're messing with. Jus-”

A talon slammed into the ground beside the man's head, it was

Chris' and she gave a very poignant and short warning.

"Master Laven has boundless kindness, but limited patience."

Her tone took a sudden shift as she waved her arms about in a very peculiar and purposeful manner.

"We fear not any enemy of only this world! Lions with toils, and men with flatterers. We bring the former, not the later. Justice descends and evil will only survive this day should it prove itself an ally in these dire times of need, for a greater evil to us both wanders the lands above!"

The two men stared at Chris with blank expressions on their faces. I think they even forgot about how close their heads were given the eggshell treatment by Chris' foot just a moment ago. Not that I blame them, but it really was time to carry on.

"The seal is complete." Susan said as she turned and walked away from what looked like a piece of art.

It was a wildly intricate mural of curves, lines and pictograms, all drawn in an ethereal white glow. It appeared as though her claw never once left the surface. For something that was only working at a fraction of its supposed strength, it certainly didn't look like it. Perhaps she was just being modest, but I'll take her word for it. We'd have to get our work done fast or get ourselves a pardon for our forceful methods quickly.

We left the two goons by the door as we strode down the hallway and down the stairs deeper beneath the city. One story and then two, I believe wherever this hideout lies, it is well below the cellars and basements of the city. The old wooden walls gave way to stone and bedrock, but the way was lit with fresh burning torches the whole way, so there was no mistaking that this wasn't the right way.

"Rose, you said his name was Telmenk? Xavier Telmenk?"

"That's right." She nodded. "We never met though, that's just who my friend told me she talked into getting me up north."

"You've never actually told me who your friend is, haven't you?"

"I haven't?"

"No, but I'm going to need it now."

"Tomiko Ginkaki, why?"

"Because I'm going to have to strike a deal and it needs to be a deal he can't refuse."

Rose titled her head in confusion, but before she could ask anything more, Chris who had taken point came to a stop and before us was another steel door. It wasn't the imposing and thick steel door from before, but it didn't appear to have any view ports. It didn't even have a door handle, not one that I could spot. It seemed like a door

that could only be opened from the inside. Not a problem if there was always someone inside.

"No stone-plate or other mechanism for gaining entry." Susan said when she caught in after holding the rear of our formation.

Her instincts for this type of thing seemed almost genetic, hell it might very well be. That meant we only had one option.

"Chris. Could you knock for us?"

"Yes sir!" She said standing at attention.

She breathed in a deep breath, closed her eyes and centered herself. When she opened her eyes, she slowly raised her forearm, but just as suddenly kicked out her leg. Her talon slammed into the door and with a massive crack and rending of steel the door was blown clear off its hinges with just a grunt of effort on her part.

Rose stood back, arms crossed and oohing and awing while Susan and I had the color in our faces drain away and go pale.

"Chris... I was being serious when I said knock-"

While I was trying to explain myself Chris and Rose rushed the room after the surprise breach, ignoring me completely.

"-I wasn't being coy. I didn't mean knock the whole door off..."

"Lets.... Let us follow, Laven." Susan said, putting a paw on my shoulder in sympathy.

I'd cry later, right now I decided to follow Susan's advise. I took a deep breath and walked through the new hole in the wall and entered the hideout. I wasn't met with the dingy and seedy looking underground laid that I expected. Besides the pieces of stone, piles of dust and rubble and the twisted and sundered floor laying the floor some five meters away, the whole room looked more like a lobby for a five star hotel.

There was candle light instead of torch light and the marble white pained walls gave the room a certain lively glow to it. Expensive looking rugs and cloth draped all around of various and intricate colors and patterns gave it a warm feeling as well. There was even a functional fountain in the very centre of the room along accompanied by no shortage of greenery. Tropical and exotic plants that would never stand a chance on the outside above us during winter. There was even what looked like a bar in the corner. It was the very spitting image of a Los Vegas casino lobby.

Rose and Chris had run only a little ways ahead and taken up defensive stances, facing off against what appeared to be the security detail that were scattered about the room. Each one of them was armed, but they seemed to be just as overwhelmed and caught off guard as we were. What caught me off guard the most, however, was at the far side of the room, about thirty meters away, was an elevated

platform with a semicircle of stairs seven steps high. It was a pile of cushions and blankets with a plush wall behind it. Submerged in all those pillows was a man, with his company.

I had a certain mental image when those goons said Lion and I wasn't let down. The man didn't appear to be that tall, but he looked like he was build like a professional weight lifter. I may be only slightly taller, but he has to weight one and a half times as much as I do. At least he could have passed for a professional, he was far too hairy. A literal forest on his chest that was not something you see on the cover of a magazine. He had a wild unkempt beard and equally unkempt head of orange-blonde hair tied up in a short pony tail. Fierce brown eyes glared at us trough that mane like hair that left me wondering if he grew it out like that just because people called him lion, or they called him lion because he looked like that.

I've seen my fair share of unique characters during my time here, but what put Susan and I on our heels was his company; five, no, six other men, all wearing only towels around their waists and each one of them a pretty boy. They were all a little too close and intimate to pass off for an innocent slumber party.

“Oh ho?” Came a gruff and playful laugh from The Lion.

Everyone else save Rose, Chris and the Lion were not calm in the least. From every direction, I heard swords being pulled from their sheaths and bow strings being drawn taut. That only caused Rose and Chris to shift into a more aggressive stance which caused the tension on the other side to rise.

“Hold it!” The Lion roared,

Shivers went down each and everyone of his mens' spines and they stood down. With only a towel around his waist, he emerged from his 'harem bed' and stood at the edge of the stairs, looming and looking down at the four of us.

“That is you, is it not? Rosette the Thorn Knight.”

“Heh. Yeah, that's right.” Rose snickered.

That name drop alone caused the shivers down each man's spine. It was quite the sight to see, about a dozen men at the same time take a step backwards against their wills before regaining their courage to hold steady as was their duty.

“A royal wyvern in addition to a priestess of the sands at that...” He said as his eyes studied Chris and Susan.

Susan seemed pretty worried earlier about being mistaken for some beast girl, as some sort of werewolf. Something that those less familiar with monsters would accuse any girl with wolf like features, but this Lion seemed to know better and more. He was spot on about Susan being not only a priestess, but recognized the type of clothes she wears bear a striking resemblance to a certain ancient kingdom.

He was even able to tell Chris wasn't just any wyvern, but one raised to serve the royal house of Domdracveria. The wyverns are and old story that isn't told much anymore, so knowing about them to such a degree is also quite odd.

At last his eyes focused on me, “And that must mean you are Mr. Laven. Am I mistaken?”

I wasn't about to let the pressure he was pushing on me cause me to back down, so I replied with a posed look, “No. That's right.”

“And what, pray tell, would lead the 'King of Nothing' to my humble abode?”

It has been some time since I last heard that said to me. But I decided to answer his question as simply and to the point as possible.

“Business.”

Xavier eyes widened then his face twisted into a wide grin. Like a lion whose dominance had been challenged after the longest time. Eager to fight, a mixture of euphoria for the occasion to stretch his claws with the exhilaration of a cat's curiosity.

He turned to his 'friends' and ordered them to leave. They hardly looked like the fighting type and the tension in the room had their nerves frazzled. It showed plain as day on their faces. He then turned to his guards and goons scattered around the room and ordered them to stand down. They seemed to do so a little slowly, as though they weren't sure they were hearing their boss correctly. They kept their hands moving though, no one seemed ready to disobey a direct order. As crazy as it sounded to them. I don't blame them, three monsters and a man just burst into their hideout like a SWAT team on a sting operation.

“Well then, Mr. Laven. Our circumstances, as odd as they are, implore me to invite you to my chambers. We seem to have much to discuss.” Xavier declared.

The lion walked down the steps and held out his arm which was soon draped in a robe for him to cover himself. Which I was glad, I wasn't really looking forward to that towel which was barely hanging on falling off. I breathed a sigh of relief not for just that, but also because this smuggler, this criminal, seemed to be an odd character who didn't seem rather concerned intruders had smashed their way into his home.

Rose and Chris finally let go of their defensive stances and took a step forward.

“HOLD IT!” The lion roared once again, even louder than before.

Rose and Chris both came to a complete stop. Their eyes widened in brief shock, but quickly regained their composure. After all,

the lion's voice was indeed powerful, but as far as physical capabilities went, he was no match for either one of them, that I was sure of.

"I said I would talk to Mr. Laven.... That means alone."

Those words which were spoken softly hit the room harder than his roars. Like a thunderclap, but silent, that left everyone deaf and unable to speak. The air was electric and I felt frozen in time, as if the first person to move would be like high ground to the storm raging above us all. I saw Chris and Rose's tails contort at odd angles, as though it conveyed their feelings without their consent. Snarled and twisted with complicated emotions. I even heard Susan gulp beside me and her tail had retreated between her legs. Now wasn't the time for cowardice. The expression on Xavier's face was challenging me.

"Laven?" Susan said, her voice bleeding concern.

"I'm sticking to the plan."

Rose and Chris turned around and had the same expressions on their faces. I wasn't going to back down now.

"This time, I'm not 'unarmed'." I gave them the best cocksure smile I could muster, "Trust me."

This wasn't going to be a repeat of the Greased Goose. I've learned my lesson and this time I know I can stand on my own. I'm not afraid of facing the lion in his den, alone. So I took a step forward as Xavier made his way down the stairs and we met face to face. He was as big as he looked from far away, but I was still able to match his stare with my own without looking up to him. I squared my shoulders and puffed out my chest to make myself feel and appear as large as I could.

"Provide these girls with whatever comforts they desire. Their safety is to be guaranteed." Xavier commanded and then said very gravely with a low rumble in his voice. "Is that clear?"

There were only nods from all around. I then followed the lion as he beckoned me onward further into his lair. Through another hallway that felt longer than necessary and up another long flight of stairs. I followed Xavier as he turned right into a spacious room. It was no less opulent than the last, but he had vanished already when I enter behind him. I could see a candle light from behind a screen and the silhouette behind it revealed to me where he had gone to. When he emerged, the lion had traded his towel and robe for more modest evening clothes, suitable for an informal dinner.

"Come, Mr. Laven, sit with me." He said while waving his hand over a table; two fine pieces of glass stemware held tightly between his fingers.

There was a bottle in his other hand, a green wine bottle. It had no label and a blue liquid inside gave it an overall turquoise color. It was unlike any other wine I was familiar with. The furniture did not

depart from the theme of wealth and luxury and I sat myself on the high back chair waiting on other end of the circular café sized table.

Perhaps he sensed my curiosity, because he soon explained himself as he uncorked the bottle with a pop and smelled the fragrance which wafted out.

"1257. A fine year for the young miss. Among my personal favorites."

"You know that without the label?" I asked skeptically.

"I consider myself a connoisseur, Mr. Laven. Perhaps not an expert, but I know my own collection like the back of my hand."

When someone mentions the word smuggler, my thoughts go first to drug and fenced goods. The fact that technicolour wine would be on that list of illegal items seems a little surreal to me. I watched as Xavier deftly poured two glasses half full then pushed mine toward my half of the table. I held it aloft between my fingers and seeing him waiting to toast I raised mine as well.

"For... business." He said.

I purposefully waited to start my first sip long after his own glass reached his lips. I took in its aroma, but I was not greeted with any lingering bitterness. No obvious poisons, at the very least. Instead smelled something incredibly sweet. I could still sense the faint aurora of alcohol, but it was overpowered by the smell of honey and fresh fruit. It tasted very much like it smelled and I was surprised at how cool it felt in my mouth and in the back of my throat.

"Well?" Xavier asked, his eyes betraying his excitement to hear my opinion.

"Chill. Very chilled. I thought you'd have to drink fresh glacial runoff to get that kind of cold. Except the bottle and the glass don't have a trace of frost."

"That is not surprising," He said with a smile. "After all, slime wine is among the best refreshments this world has to offer us."

I came to a complete stop. Did he just say: 'slime'? That wasn't a word you often wanted to hear connected to what you were drinking. The pleasant chill still sliding down my throat churned into a completely different sensation because of it. I gave another dry swallow to chase after it and placed the glass back down on the table. Fighting to keep my mouth straight and my eyebrows leveled.

"Your first glass?" He said, reading me with ease.

"You wouldn't be wrong, saying that."

"Emi, that's her name," Xavier began explaining. "At least what her husband ended up calling her. Slime wine, of course, is specially fermented slime portions. Prepared and treated exactly the same way vine fruit is. It is a rare delicacy. Quite expensive, but you can tell from the taste that it is worth every coin. It is hard to barter for

the portions after all. Sometimes also very dangerous... depending on the girl."

"Depending on the girl?" I asked, my lip turning up a little now.

"Slimes, Mr. Laven. They are in a constant state of growth, but they can only hold together to a certain point before any excess growth splits off from the main body. Without its own core, it's nothing more than jelly. I've heard a man can live off the nutrition of it alone and they are more than happy to let the man do so. You need not worry yourself."

Taking that all in, this was the body... the excess of.... a monster. Fermented and bottled as wine... But it really didn't taste that bad at all. No, it tasted good, way too good for its own good.

"So you've made a fortune off this?"

"Several fortunes, Mr. Laven."

"Several? You said it was dangerous. Wouldn't that be pushing your luck?"

"Dangerous? For many, yes. But not for people like myself."

Xavier's cryptic game of cat and mouse was leaving me in the dust yet again. I kept silent and maintained eye contact. I could only hope he'd continue talking instead of test just how far my lack of knowledge went. That would put me at a great disadvantage later.

"I take it you've had less than favorable encounters with monster-kind?"

"Orcs, Amazons and Succubi, Mr. Telmenk."

"Oh my." The lion said raising an eyebrow before returning to his professional smile. "And please, you can call me Xavier."

"I would offer my condolences, Mr. Laven, or should I simply call you...?"

No, that isn't my last name. But sharing that my memories are a mess at best and nonexistent at worst wasn't going to help my cause right now.

"Laven will do, thank you."

"As I was saying, Laven, I can't say I've ever had your problem."

I raised my eyebrow skeptically at the lion. I had a hard time believing what he was implying.

"It is true. Monsters show me no interest in me, or people like me."

"Barrel chested and hairy?" I joked.

"Ha ha ha ha!" he laughed heartily and thankfully not angered. "No. Because of my nature."

I sat back in my chair and slumped my shoulders when the revelation hit me at last.

“Homosexual?”

“Correct.” He said taking another sip from his glass. “Monsters are driven large in part by their instincts, but those instincts have never led them in my direction. Even should I find myself stuck in the thickest, densest miasma of demonic energy of the most perverse demon realm.”

“Are you saying your immune?”

“Immune? No. Even after walking through such a place I'll need more than a couple wanks to calm myself down. But even the hungriest monster would look over the likes of me.”

I was having a hard time believing what I was hearing, but he sounded sincere to me.

“So I decided to use that to my advantage. And here I sit. With more wealth than a poor boy from a poor village could have dreamed of! If I had been born a century ago, I would have never had the chance. Especially with.... baser pleasures.”

“What are you getting at, Xavier?”

The lion decided to change the subject, “What was the first thought through your head when I invited you up here?” He asked very seriously.

I took a moment to study the expression on his face. It looked just as serious as the tone of his voice just was. And I answered seriously as well.

“I was shocked at first, but not worried.”

“Oh ho?”

“Xavier, am I your type?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

I could feel his gaze as he looked me up and down and into my eyes, but eventually he shrugged his shoulders and simply said, “No.” With the smile returning to his face he continued, “Guys like you are too serious. Too sour. No fun at all.”

“That's what I thought.”

“An odd thought at that. A century ago I'd be on the other end of thrown stones. 'Against the Almighty's grand design' they'd claim. 'Blasphemy. Sodomy', they'd scream. The scriptures of the Almighty say that union is to be man and woman and that they should multiply. Anything else, is an abomination.”

I feel as though I've heard this before.

“But look at me now! People like me are worth more than their weight in gold!” He said and laughed heartily. “How many men do you know who can walk into demon realm or up to any monster and not get captured? Food and goods from monsters, I've collected a lot. Anyone else could offer themselves up in return, but sometimes they don't feel like afterwards. Sometimes she doesn't want to let go. I wont judge that kind of life, but I'm a merchant at heart. I don't have the kind

of stamina, not like you, Laven."

A jab? Or a compliment?

"I couldn't ever dream of tying myself down like that. Being drained dry for a few scraps of slime portions. But it's the dream for someone and I'm more than willing to make coin off of it."

"I'm sure there's more feeling behind it than that," I said.

"From experience, Laven?"

"An old friend of mine, Donald Ceerly."

"Ceerly? I absolutely LOVE his work. I have a number of his patterns. How unexpected that you would know such an artist."

"Knew." I said gravely. "The last time I met him, he was on his death bed and that was about a month ago. He's long gone by now."

Xavier's smile was wiped from his face and he sunk back into his chair and took more of a swig than a sip from his glass.

He tried to smile weakly and joke, "I guess that makes what I have worth even more?"

Xavier wasn't satisfied with his jovial attempt to let the news roll of his back and it only made him more depressed on top of feeling shamed. We sat in a moment of silence for the old man.

"How did that happen? I pray death found him kindly." He finally asked, taking one last swig from his glass and then refilled it

"He simply started breaking down," I said. "If I had to give a number.... Two weeks tops after I last saw him. He could still move, slowly, but I could tell he was pushing himself."

"Moving?"

"We made a deal. He was going to stick his neck out for me. Do one last favor for someone before going away. He wanted to be with his wife for the last moments of his life."

"An odd request..."

"With his other wife," I said, stressing the word.

Xavier's face looked blank for a moment then it dawned upon him, almost overwhelming him.

"That would explain the quality of his silks," He said matter-of-factly. Xavier then let out a short chuckle, "Well then, I guess I have to apologize for my rudeness just now. That leaves me some food for thought. I would have sworn differently. That old codger had fooled everyone all these years..."

"I don't know if his situation was the norm, or something special and the hysteria I see from people every day is the right way to go, but even after all the trouble I've been through with monsters... That scene touched me."

"Hysteria is a powerful thing, Laven. Not even I'm immune to whimsies of the masses. For good reasons I'm afraid."

“You're telling me this after you proudly declare that you're invincible?”

“Far from it, Laven. No doubt you've seen the power monsters can have on the minds of men. Whether it doesn't work on me, or they simply choose not to use it on me, scholars debate that in their libraries and universities. They have been, do and probably always will... Maybe a century ago when the monsters were running wild, no different from how they were a thousand years ago, minus the butchery, they simply didn't care and did what they wanted with whatever man they caught or struck their fancy. Were any of those men like me? Taken against their will, with their heads like mine? We won’t know. Like I said, there were only stones waiting for someone who didn't keep that locked up. These are better times, the monsters have calmed, I can travel the world freely. Collecting wares and a fortune. I could be a diplomat, an ambassador to the demon realms. I could raise a sword and have an impenetrable shield to their charms... but that doesn't mean everyone is invincible.”

I kept quiet and waited for Xavier to continue, taking another sip from my glass long after my first.

“There are three kinds of monsters. Have you heard of that before?”

I placed my glass down and answered, “Monsters that have always existed, or suddenly appear. Monsters who are born between a man and monster... And the last one... When someone is turned into a monster.”

“Correct. If a man were ever to lose touch with that it means to be a man. To no longer see himself as one. To desire to be with another man, from the bottom of his heart or a thought, a voice buried deep in his mind... along with those other two... Should his body be tainted with demonic energy or filled to the brim with it... Should that happen. Even he will turn into a monster.”

“I've traveled quite a bit and not once have I seen a monster like-”

“I said nothing about male monsters, Laven.”

I felt a chill go down my spine.

“It's rare and I have not seen it happen. But I've seen what comes of it long after it is already far too late. It's not just appearances. I've seen their daughters for myself. Not adopted. Their daughters. Born from them and conceived in their bellies. And it doesn't just happen to men like myself either, although it does happen more often... To men like myself.” He was getting very solemn, but he just as suddenly grinned wildly and sang, “But you don't have to worry about that! Not with company you keep. Ha ha ha!”

Xavier said thumping his hairy chest. 'And neither do I!' he said

roaring with laughter. With the other arm, he raised his glass in the other for another toast. I sighed out all the tension at once and obliged him. I'd have to mull over that later, but it was about time to get down to business.

“I had only one request from Ceerly when I did that favor for him. And I regret to say because I failed on my part. I need that same favor from you.”

Xavier kept quiet and implored me to continue with his eyes.

“I need you to use your connections and channels to smuggle the girls and myself to the Free Ports. Together. Immediately.”

The jovial expression on Xavier s face slowly melted away until all that was left was The Lion. Fun time was over. This was his business face.

“And why would I risk jeopardizing my business, my logistics to, sorry to say, an outsider like you? You've already failed once haven't you?”

“Because I had to do it to save the man's life. The Inquisition was after him and I got their attention instead. His wife and daughters would have been butchered if I didn't. Besides, this is deal you can't refuse.” I said plainly.

The dander on The Lion kicked up when rumbled, “Choose your words carefully, Mr. Laven. I've had my troubles with the Church, but now you're saying you got the Inquisition's attention?”

“A deal you can't refuse, because you'd be foolish not to. Although I'm a little insulted you'd think I would try to strong arm you into it.”

The Lion calmed down a little, realizing he had laid it on a little too thick and slumped back down into his chair.

“Your braver than I thought. There are more of my men in this place than those you've seen.”

“You've already let in two walking flame throwers and someone who could curse every living soul to a fate worse than death into your house. But that's beyond the point. I'm talking business. Business opportunities.”

Maybe he was impressed by my audacity, but The Lion faded a little and I caught a wry smile in the corner of his mouth and he raised his glass to his lips.

“Go on,” Was all he said.

“I've come from the North. That you no doubt know if you've heard of me. Which you have before today. There was also a certain place I stayed. Stayed during a rather important event. An event I may have had a big part in how it was resolved. Because of that, I may also have certain favors I could call upon.”

“And that would be...?” Xavier asked, his curiosity piqued.

“After a certain ship sank. Trade is going to backlog. I'm sure you're very worried about this. Trade from the North and anything moving up or down from there is going to come to a grinding halt. There's a lot of demon realms up there, aren't there? Thanks to it being mostly pagan lands. Pagans who are more sympathetic to monsters than the Church of the Almighty. You make your money getting your goods from those monsters and selling them to anybody who is willing. Through whatever channel s you can make. But you have a hard time of that because the Church puts on the pressure to have it outlawed. As much of it as it can get away with that is. What would you say if I claimed what's happening in the north is gonna cause a big shift in the markets? What would you say if I claimed it didn't have to be a loss, but it's just a new ground floor? And finally... What would you say if I claimed I had a connection to a certain royal house and I vouched for a certain merchant that could be trusted to help with that?”

Xavier started to frown as I went on and he only had a few short words, “Nice story. But do you expect me to buy all that?”

“Worried about capital? Because I'm not done yet. I also know someone else.”

“You sure do know a lot of 'people'.” He said half joking, half skeptically.

I only needed to say two words and hope for the best: “Tomiko Ginkaki.”

The Lion's eyes went wide. I didn't expect that kind of reaction.

“What did you just say?”

“The one who sponsored the Thorn Knight for years. Banked all the money she made over a decade. Used that money to further her own investments. You could say I am on... very intimate... unique and special terms with the Thorn Knight. A lot of money, or big favours are owed to her from Ginkaki. But there's only one way for us to cash in. Those three girls and I get to the Free Ports. Healthy, unharmed and happy... Would we really be outsiders if we were in together on a deal like that?”

Xavier glared at me. His eyes were unflinching as they analyzed me and calculations went off inside his head. His frown intensified and I could only glare back at him. Glaring back and trying to keep as straight a face as possible. I tried to keep my composure and not wither and crumble under such a fierce glare.

“HA HA HA HA HA!” The Lion roared out in laughter, almost causing my heart to skip a beat.

I almost leapt out of my chair when he also slammed his fist into the table, causing the slime wine bottle to jump up into the air and land back down with a clank. The serious look on his face was

banished and he was smiling ear to ear again.

"Laven... You may be sour, but a slice of lemon is always a good addition to any drink. You... have got yourself a deal."

The lion extended his large burly and hairy hand toward me from the other side of the table. I felt a wash of relief that for once everything seemed to work out in my favor for once. I reached over and we wrapped our hands around one another and exchanged a lively handshake. Each of us apparently trying to crush the other man's hand.

"So when is it you wanted to leave?" He asked.

"Tomorrow." I said.

His grip slackened a bit and his smiling face relaxed and dropped in surprise. I titled my head slightly and furrowed my brows. 'You got a problem with that?' was what my expression said.

"Right... Tomorrow it is then..." He said meekly before breaking off the handshake and sitting back down in his chair.

He then raised one last toast before we'd break. He would have quite a bit of work ahead of him to get us started.

***

Hidden from the moon above and from the people of Anthren was a sordid hideaway, a refuge for criminals. An alley long forgotten. A place disconnected from the rest of the world, walled off, the windows overlooking it, shuttered ages ago. Moldy old crates and empty rotting barrels littered both sides of the only path leading from the back of the shop to an imposing steel door. A missing layer of grime and dust gave away hints of its recent use.

Walking forward gracefully, quieter than a cat, and naturally blending into the shadows was a lone solitary figure. Cloaked in brown from head to toe with a face hidden away. The grime and the fake decor of the alley did not fool the shadow at all. It knelt down and traced a finger over the many surfaces. Between those fingers the grime rolled and felt and held up to the shadowy cowl where its smell and even taste was judged.

Seemingly satisfied, the figure floated over toward the steel door and stood before it. Looking calmly over its frame, its size and its height. A small hand rapped against the hard surface, each one echoing on the other side.

Seated and bored on the other side was a pudgy man still tending to rope burns on his wrists and ankles, but the sound of another series of knocks on the door had him jump to attention. The first couple of seconds were a panic, but he soon recovered his calm.

Just a false alarm earlier. He thought to himself. Boss said everything was fine. He tried to comfort himself. Just don't mess up this time. He warmed himself. He swallowed hard and stood up,

shaking a little before he smacked both his cheeks between his hands and regaining his nerves.

"Pat, if that's you, again, I swear I'm gonna kill ya!"

The man stood next to the door and slid open the viewing port and looked out into the darkness. Only a faint moonlight and the torch light behind him illuminated what stood before the door. And what he saw standing there was one lone person. Cloaked in brown and with a face completely hidden. It wasn't Pat.

"Who are you? What do you want?" He bellowed.

A feminine voice answered back, "Where is Laven?"

It was cold, monotonous and without emotion. Something about it caused the man's heart to beat faster and sink into his stomach. His pores to sweat oozed with sweat, but a chill overtook him. His body forgot to move, but his mind was still working, on account of forcing himself to focus. The reward for berating himself for almost an entire day. It was a boring job, most of the time, it was an easy job, most of the time, but it was the best paying job he ever had. He wasn't going to mess it up by screwing up twice in one day.

"I don't know what you're talking about. This is private property, so buzz off before I call the guards." He bluffed.

She repeated herself once more, "Where is Laven?"

The tone in her voice hadn't changed, but there was a venom to those words that did not sting any less than the first time. His heart sank deeper and his sweat slowly started to drench his shirt.

"Laven you said?" The man said in response.

He remembered that name.

"Yeah. Let me go ask if he's here. Just wait right there."

He closed the eye slit and turned around. He laid his eyes on the rack of crossbows. Slowly, on his tip toes he pulled one off the rack. From a pouch at his side he produced a bolt and carefully slid it under the clip of the mechanism ready to fire. This time he wasn't going to take any chances. He only had one job. Guard the door. Don't let anyone in he didn't know or didn't have the right papers. This wasn't someone she knew. It was a lady at that. There's no way any lady had any business here. She was suspicious and didn't have any papers. There wasn't even any special knock he and his friends made up for the door. He remembered what his senior had told him years ago, 'don't take any bull shit, get straight to the violence'.

"Okay! Yeah? Really? Okay!" He called out loudly. "Yeah, I'll just get the door then!"

He said for the lady outside to buy himself from time. Now wasn't the time to listen to that little voice in the back of his head telling him not to. He got paid good money to keep this door shut. If that meant he had to do a little something... ugly... then so be it. Better that

then having to face the ugly streets again. He was sweating, breathing heavily. He swallowed hard once and then held his breath. He grabbed hold of a latch on the door. A lower latch, at about hip level. He pictured the lady on the other side, where she was, how far she was standing from the door. He held his breath and listened. He could hear a faint breathing on the otherwise when he focused all his senses fueled by every drop of adrenaline in his veins.

He held the crossbow with one hand, the other on the latch. Squaring his shoulders and planting his feet, he exhaled slowly and tried to prepare himself. Before his lungs were empty, he quickly opened the latch and pulled the trigger. With a twang, the bolt sailed through the small opening and he quickly shut it again. He took another deep breath and went to reach for another bolt... but he stopped. There was a twang, but there wasn't a thwack followed by a crunch, scream or thud.

His eyes bounced every which way in his sockets as he tried to calm himself and took another deep breath. When he listened again... He didn't hear any breathing from the outside.

Did I miss? He thought to himself, of course he didn't. He couldn't have missed. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. Maybe she left? He tried to comfort himself. Maybe, that would be for the best. I better make sure. He warned himself. He couldn't afford to mess up again. His fat pudgy fingers reached for the latch on the eye slit, he leaned in and pulled it open.

There was a thwack. There was a crack. There was something green. There was pain. But it didn't last long and it was suddenly very dark. Then there wasn't anything at all. If there was going to be a thud or a scream like there should have been, the man wasn't around to hear them.

Pierced through the eye slit was a blade, green, curved and long. Long enough to stick out from the back of the man's skull. Jutting out from where the man's brain stem was, was the blade. The man's death was near instantaneous. His body slackened, the crossbow in his other hand fell to the floor as his hand went dead. The weight and girth of the man pressed up against the door as the sickening sound of churning grey matter and creaking bones filled the room as the blade was pulled back out through the eye slit.

The pudgy man's body started sliding down the door, leaving a trail of blood from his head as he went, but before he reached halfway, sparks flew and the sound of sundering steel echoed in the room. For just the briefest of moments, the edges of sharp green blades sliced through the left and right side of the door. One stroke for each side at the same time. It cleaved through the locks, bolts and hinges. Just as suddenly the door come crashing inwards, falling on top of the man

and crushing him underneath. Only the man's legs and arms, which were splayed like a snow angel could be seen.

The figure waiting outside was exactly the same as she was when she was waiting before. There was no sign of any weapon on her person. She walked forward and climbed over the steel door like a carpet, crushing the man underneath it further. As she walked by, she dropped something from her clenched right hand. It landed in the man's cold, dead hands. It was a crossbow bolt. Undamaged and unbloodied. What was left bloody, was the floor under the man, where a large pool of fresh warm blood was expanding.

The cloaked girl ventured further into the hideout and followed the stairs down. Her face was hidden, but there was no doubt that face displayed no fear. Only a cold, calculated ruthlessness. Devoid of any emotion. Where there should have been a second door, candle light shone through. Not that the door would have stopped her for long, but she passed trough the doorway undaunted. Inside there were several other criminals and smugglers gathered, discussing and relaxing. The arrival of the girl nearly caught them off guard completely. Even though she was brazenly walking in the open, she didn't make a single sound. Not even a single foot step. It was only by chance that one lone man would look up from his drink and spot the girl glide through the door.

His shouts alerted the entire room and they all jumped to attention immediately. Seat at a table high atop an elevated platform was a large burly man. A man who had been at working signing and checking papers. He shot out a fierce glare at the intruder. But he quickly felt a powerful pressure crash into him from that side of the room. It overwhelmed him and instead of standing up and roaring in rage, he cowered in his chair.

The girl spoke once again coldly and without emotion, “Where is Laven?”

Without a word from their boss, the first of the men drew his sword and charged at the intruder. Her face was covered in the cowl, her blind spots were pretty much her entire field of vision, but when the man got close, a subtle snick produced the green blade once again. It swivelled into place from her forearm next to her wrist. It was a curved blade, green and sharp, a blade punctuated by seven serrated teeth. The blade locked into place on the girl's wrist, the curve parallel to her palm, curving inwards toward herself. The top of the blade was blunted, but study and thick. Thick enough, as the man found out, to easily block his sword swing. The end of the curve was a fine point, a sharp point. Sharp enough to shred the steel door and it certainly was enough to slice into the man. After blocking his swing rebounded backward and she twisted her arm around and drew the serrated edge of the blade against the man's chest with one fluid motion. An eruption

of blood exploded from his chest.

With a scream, he fell over backwards. Filled more with anger and want for revenge, the others soon followed after their friend. They converged on her position, but she didn't even make a move. She didn't even raise her arms to protect herself. All she did was snap her other blade into position on her other arm with another snick.

She side stepped a lunge from a spear and brought her curved edge down upon in, cleaving it in two with ease. She held out both arms and blocked two different swings from her left and right at once and deflected their momentum so they ran past her, behind her and into each other. The cloaked girl spun around and delivered a round house kick to another attacker, his neck cracking at an angle and his body crumbled to the floor. Another man ran head long at her, but she merely thrust her meter long blades into his chest. The edges of the blades cut upwards toward his shoulders as she lifted him up off the ground then threw him back down where he slid off her blades now drenched in blood.

She never looked any of them in the eyes. She didn't even register their existences. They were merely obstacles to her. Her eyes hidden beneath the cowl were fixed on only one person. Xavier, The Lion. She never took a step backward, she only moved forward, at a walk and cutting down anyone that got in her way. The last man who was brave enough to approach lunged in, but soon found his neck pinched between the two blades. His body soon crumpling to the floor, missing its head. The rest of the men backed up horrified. Nothing was stopping her now as she got closer to where The Lion sat.

“Boss!” Shouted one of the men. “Run!” His voice cracked, nearly croaking from the tears he was fighting back.

Xavier still had not moved. There was a force holding him there. A blood-lust the likes that he had never felt before focused on him and him alone. He couldn't see the girl's eyes, but his instincts felt them on him. He knew that those were not ordinary blades. They were much too sharp. For a girl of that size... she was much too strong... She was a monster... He knew he stood no chance.

“Boss! Run!” His men cried out to him again.

A group of them had gathered up tabled and chairs to make an improvised shield wall before his steps. But he still hesitated for a moment longer. He couldn't bear with the guilty of fleeing, but the bone chilling words that come from her lips finally sank into his frozen wits. She was after Laven. She somehow knew he was here. Someone had to warn him!

The Lion threw his fist high up into the air, and slammed it back down on the stone seat beneath him. A weak porous stone painted over to look like the others crumbled and flipped a switch underneath.

A one way, one time trap door dropped behind him and onto a smooth ramp which he tumbled backwards on. It was dark, he couldn't even see his own limbs flailing about as he somersaulted backward over and over again. The painful ride did not last long though. He eventually slid to a stop when the ramp level off once again.

Xavier desperately reached into his pockets for flint and tinder and sparked them for what little light he could muster. Just enough so he could spot a torch that should be waiting. When he found it, he quickly limped into the darkness. Beneath the city, beneath his hidden hallways and catacombs which he used as his home and primary storehouse, was the old underground river of Anthren. It had long been blocked off when land was reclaimed from the lake to expand the city and the limestone caves was now his escape tunnel.

He spelunked deeper and deeper into the cave. He'd eventually reach an exit that sat above the tide and wave level of the lake. A pile of debris that had been piled to block off the cave. With a few stones removed from the top and an overgrowth of vegetation covering it, it was well hidden. He limped onward with the only consolation being that the assassin seemed only intent on her target. She'd only kill anyone who got in her path to him and ultimately Laven. The biggest fortune of his life was waiting. He had done the math and it all worked out. The big one, the one that would put him not in the old abandoned sewers but a mansion, maybe even a castle was within reach. All he needed was to use Laven and his plan for that.

He had moved as quickly as he could for about half an hour when he finally tired and come to a rest. Scraps of rotten wood were scattered around, probably what used to be scaffolding decades upon decades ago. He was tired, very tired. The Lion found an old metal ring in the wall to hold his torch while he hunched over and heaved. He held out the palm of his right hand on a wall to his right and pushed himself up with his left hand on his knee. The sound of his breathing was quickly drowned out by the wound of cracking bone, rending flesh and scrapping of stone. A pain shot up his arm, into his shoulder and into his brain. His body shook and shuddered and was pinned in place.

Xavier looked up slowly to see a green blade stabbed through his right hand and into the stone wall. Standing nearby, was the cloaked figure eyes locked on him with blood intent. He couldn't muster anything at all. Not a scream, not even a whimper.

“Where is Laven?” She repeated herself.

“Words finally managed to escape past his lips, “H-how in the hells did you...?”

She pulled her blade from his hand and the Lion for all his impressive size, strength and imposing image collapsed onto the ground. All from a girl only a third his size. His hand was bleeding, it

was in pain and growing cold, but another shot of warmth spread through his body, this time from his leg. A sick crunch and tearing with a flash of green and the girl had stabbed one of her blades through the Lion's right leg. It went all the way through, even into the stone underneath. This time he howled in pain.

“Next, I will rupture your femoral artery,” She said without emotion. “You will bleed out and die in two minutes. Unless answer me, 'where is Laven'?”

The pain was frying all his senses and he couldn't think straight. That was until she twisted her blade ever so slightly so a serrated tooth ground against his femur, scrapping splinters of bone off it and pushing the muscle and flesh aside. He looked up and he saw through the cowl. A pair of indigo colored eyes, dull and without life to them stared down at him. Twitching above those eyes were two thin green appendages, like antenna tasting the air and following his minute motions as he lay on the ground in agony. Looking into them was perhaps the worst decision he could have made. He felt as though his soul was being sucked out from the sheer blood lust and killing intent billowing behind that cowl, like a poisonous miasma choking the life out of him.

It was enough to slice though the last string holding his wits together.

“Highway Station C! Station C! The wagon train at dawn!”

The foreign object was pulled from his leg and Xavier was free to move once again. When he looked around, the assassin had already left and he was alone, hurt, bleeding in a damp place he thought no one else knew about. Xavier sat there, in agony and in shame. His right hand and arm felt dead, along his leg which felt like lead. He was, but the lion managed to tear a strip of cloth from his shirt and tie it around his thigh. It was the only thing he could do to stop flow of blood. The only thing he could do to was slow down what could kill him and hope for the best.

The assassin was on the loose and was now heading in the right direction.

Chapter 57

A well placed kick was more than the poor door could handle and it snapped in half as it was torn off its hinges. The only thing that was left behind after the savage blow was a lingering echo; a loud crack with a thunderous crash. A giant woman with frightening talons for feet had sent that door to meet its maker, and perhaps if it was lucky, its repairer. She didn't even have to put that much effort into it, that was the truly scary part. The satisfied grin on her face that told me she was pleased with her handiwork, came second. The complete lack of regard for the possibility that it was never a good idea to smash doors down where ever we went, was third.

"Do you have an issue with doors, Chris?" I asked. "Do you need to talk about it?"

A calm but equally exasperated voice placed a paw on my shoulder, "A fruitless endeavor." Susan sighed.

Is it because she has no hands? Door knobs and handles insult her? Is that why she gets a kick out of doing this every time?

"We were invited to be here this time, you know?" I continued in spite of the warnings.

"They lock these back entrances all the time." Rose said, moseying on through from behind.

Torchlight from Rose's tail illuminated the way and we followed her into the expansive warehouse. The sun had yet to crest over the lake and the morning twilight covered the entire city in darkness. This wasn't a modern metropolitan area, so the city did somewhat sleep; a lack of electricity does that to a place. But the size of this warehouse was certainly making me doubt the scale that things were built on in this world. Castles on mountain tops, city walls of unprecedented height and girth. I was at a loss to put it all into perspective. This storehouse which was on the outskirts of the Anthren Station of the Imperial Highway was just another example of it.

The Swift was just one example of it. Its size rivaled that of cruise liners and oil tankers. But it was made almost exclusively of wood and it was old, very old. Worn wooden walls and a battered stone foundation of this warehouse told me the same story. Huge columns of stone held up the roof that had to be about ten meters tall and a lattice work of fine woodwork held aloft the roof above. Row upon row of crates and boxes were stacked and lined, each filled to the brim with goods from the north to make those in south wealthy and those from the south meant to feed the north.

Despite the clutter, the whole place felt eerily empty.

Rose stopped at where the door had skidded to a half and squat down to inspect it.

“See? A Bolt. Looks like it was still locked.”

“An invitation, indeed.” Chris said pinching her chin between in talons deep in thought.

“We'll never know now, will we? Since you also broke the door clear in half.” I retorted.

As I picked up the door at one corner, the weight of the other half caused the few splinters that were still holding it in one piece to snap and it crashed back down to the ground.

“This time I'm just glad there wasn't someone behind it.”

“My vexation lies with the fact that there is not a soul present.” Susan said with concern evident in her voice.

“It's week's end.” Rose said standing up and stretching her back. “Day of rest or something.”

A Sabbath? That would explain part of the look on Xavier's face when I said we needed to disappear 'tomorrow'. He did agree in the end though. I suppose he has enough influence to get one of these trains rolling with just a skeleton crew. Picking up sticks on a Sunday could be forgiven with some pocket change for an indulgence or two. But in the end, I had to agree with Susan, this was the way we were told ahead of time to sneak in from. The door shouldn't be locked... No, we don't know if it was locked or not because someone decided to assume it wasn't... I'm getting too caught up in these two girl's shenanigans. It really is too early in the morning.

"Can you really afford to let the whole thing just idle for a day each week? Isn't the Imperial Highway the blood of the empire?" I asked.

"Appropriated after the last great demon war for civilian use." Susan began to lecture. "Its purpose is monumentally slewed for the movement of goods for profit rather than for practical applications."

"For profit sounds pretty essential to me... At least for any merchant that is."

Once Chris caught wind of our conversation, she slid in, "Drafted by Emperor Krenus V The Wise. Completed by his son, Emperor Krenus VI: The untold hero of the last great war!"

Susan cleared her throat and tried to continue, "As I was previously saying. Krenus, the senior, witnessed the failure of other nations to combat the growing Demon Lord's horde, and so invented, drafted and began constructing the finest infrastructure spanning his empire that the world had ever seen. Such was his magnificence.... Nowhere near your magnificence of course, Pharaoh."

The way ever serious Susan said that so sincerely, nearly gushing, and not just trying to cover her ass... It felt a little too much.

"Moving troops and supplies about the Empire so quickly to any threat from any direction. Even outnumbered for the Demon Lord's

horde, they were an equal standstill for nearly a century before-"

"Forcing the grandest battle the world had ever seen!" Chris blurted out, throwing herself between Susan and I.

"No. Christophaclies..." Susan said, pulling Chris back out of my face. "The Highway is the technological and organizational marvel that secured ultimate victor-"

"Ha! Of course not. The war was decided upon the Celreulian Plains outside the Imperial City. Where the Demon Lord gambled his whole force, with him in the lead, to crush humanity once and for all! A spearhead attack which was defeated by the sound tactical minds of the time!"

"One battle does not a war make." Susan said sternly, stepping up on the tips of her paws to look Chris square in the face.

"Fu fu fu fu. Exactly what a feather pushing scribe would think," Chris retorted, shaking her head with her forearms on her hips. "My great great grandmother soared over the skies that day, fighting for air superiority in defense of the armies of men below. A defeat there would have been a deathblow to the Empire. After all, the capital is the hub for which the highway connected to from all points!"

"Such important periods in time are not determined by the minutest fractions of history, no matter how significant. A thousand battles were won before then due to sound logistical support. The Battle of Celreulian is merely one out of endless other events, small, numerous or singular that could have decided the future. You would do best to-"

"Big talk from someone who was hiding away in her tomb at the time."

Oh boy. Here we go. Shoshanah does not like being reminded how technically old she really is... They were almost grinding their foreheads against one another already.

"That was a different lifetime ago." She seethed. "I was not myself, nor did I serve in any 'Demon Lord's' horde!"

"I've memorized all the songs, great, short and long. Handed down from generation to generation. I wouldn't expect someone who read about it all in some dusty book to understand."

"What did you just-?"

Finally Rose chimed in, "Pretty sure it was the Hero Saint who slew the Demon Lord that settled all that. His army broke up after that." Rose thought about that a little more. "You could say it was all just to get the demon lord and the hero in one place to-"

Susan and Chris both descended upon Rose with their rebukes and overwhelmed her. Soon they were all trying to talk over one another until no one could understand what was being said anymore.

"Can we save it for the train?" I begged. "It's going to be a long trip, we can talk all we want then. Let's... Let's not screw this up with anymore, okay? No more door like incidents. We're supposed to be guests."

All three went silent, looked at one another and sighed.

"Master is correct. We shouldn't tarry!" Chris bellowed, making an about face in mood on the spot. "We should be gone and upon the rails before the city wakes. Before our enemies rise."

We were all in agreement, finally, so we navigated the warehouse until we had twisted and turned our way through. This time slid open a huge barn sized door. It stood almost as tall as the ceiling itself and on the floor were iron rails that led outside. I was glad I didn't have to lecture Rose or Chris about not breaking this door down. But only because we were on the inside this time, where the latch to lock the door was. While Chris and Rose put their backs into sliding the door open, the hint of dawn in the distance illuminated the entirety of the station before more.

It was magnificent. Tens of thousands of square meters of warehouses, stockyards, roads, tracks, cranes and the like. A huge levee near the lake held back the lake as the entire station was nestled in its shadow. The port itself just on the other side of that dam and the cargo leisurely lowered from above. On the opposite side of the yard, giant cranes sat still, but their purpose was clear: moving thousands upon thousands of tons worth of material up toward the levee and the ships which wait on the other side. Far from the levee, on the other side of the yard, was the station. We were elevated on the half of the yard which brought goods up toward the lake, so I could look down and see the row upon row of rails. They were identical to the railroads I was familiar with.

They split and diverged, and upon each of the capillaries sat idle wagon, empty and still laden with goods. Wheat, stone, timber, crates and barrels containing tools, furs or whatever was produced elsewhere within the Empire. Like the veins of a leaf, they all congregated at one point, one pair of tracks heading south. Waiting there, down below and far away, was a long train of wagons and a series of what appeared to be engines.

There were three of them, but they didn't look like any engine I was familiar with. The same went for the wagons. They were wood, some of them were flatcars, some of them looked like freight cars, but looked more like Oregon Trail wagons refitted to fit their wheels on the narrow rails. Wooden walls and tin roofs, sometimes taut fabric. There was certainly no uniformity about them. They all looked almost unique, each constructed somewhere else, at different times. The only ones that looked absolutely the same were the engines at the forefront. The

only thing uniting them all was that they were all built to spec, to stay on the rails.

They were barely within sight and barely distinguishable, but my eyes were drawn to those engines. Out of the grit and patchwork of what accompanied them, they seemed regal. Almost fantastical. I had been given the same impression by looking at certain areas of the station. Stone bridges, columns, walls, foundations. Some old pieces of masonry looked like it had been cut from another time. Those engines felt very much the same to me.

"The Old Imperial Highway, at last." Susan sighed.

"I haven't seen anything like it." I said, still awestruck. "Well, no. That's not quite right. I never expected to see something like this. Those engines in particular."

"Alchemical fire. Agitating the flame spirits housed within causes the flames to swell and contract then-"

"-Displace the air by alternating rapidly between hot and cold. The pressure causing a piston to move a flywheel. Which then turns to power the wheels below it. Enough power and it pulls the other cars behind it."

I looked over at Susan, who didn't seem bothered at all that I interrupted her. She looked surprised instead.

"I mean... It sounds just like a basic steam engine. Maybe simpler because of magic..." I muttered almost inaudibly to myself.

"Steam?" Susan said, tilting her head. "And that would-"

"Laven~" Rose drawled rascally as she slowly collided into me, wrapping her arms around one of mine. "Come on, come on!"

I could feel Susan's lip and eyebrow twitch this time. The second interruption after the first didn't sit too well with her. I think I know why, but Rose was demanding my attention... and wrapped around my arm like that other attentions of mine I couldn't control.

"The countryside is really beautiful this time of year," She continued to gush while playfully. "We gotta find a good car. Dangle our legs off the side and watch it all pass by." Her smile turned into a coquettish grin, "It's really... Romantic."

Rose titled her head onto my shoulder and closed her eyes while she giggled and grinned, I could feel Susan fuming just a meter away, but I felt nothing from Chris. I immediately came to my senses like a bucket of cold water had been dumped on top of my head. I didn't have to turn my head far to see Chris perched on the ledge, staring off into the distance.

"Nothing..." She said with a rasp to her voice.

Rose's playfulness ceased, Susan too stopped and they both turned to face Chris as well.

"What do you mean, Chris?"

Chris' sharp eyes pieced through the near darkness and the distance she could see... far eclipsed our collective sight. Whatever she said next was bound to be significant. When she turned around to face us, the look on her face only proved my suspicions.

"There isn't anyone here." She growled.

"That can't be," I said. "The deal was final, there's no way... No way he'd turn it down."

"An ambush?" Susan said stepping forward. "But-"

"No." Chris said flatly. "I sense no workers... I sense no... Agents of darkness either."

Nothing. Nothing at all? An ambush for retribution from Xavier, for embarrassing him and almost holding him hostage. Authorities from Anthren catching on and sending their guards after us. The church? All those options tumbled through my head... But, just as Chris said, there was nothing. That itself was an impossibility. Either the deal went through or not. If not, then someone would be waiting her for us.

Chris' eyes couldn't see anything. Susan's ears twitched and her nostrils flared as she sniffed the cool morning air. But they each said there was nothing. Their senses were keen, supernaturally keen. There's no way something would get past their-

"Laven?" Rose said, worried, still clinging to my arm. "You're sweating..."

I rubbed my other hand over my brow and felt a layer of cold sweat. As soon as I felt the chill, a light gust rustled my clothes and I felt my pits were also drenched. What frightened me most of all, was when I pulled back my hand and looked at it. My fingers glistened with sweat, but my hand was also shaking.

"R-Rose? Maybe you're just clinging on a little too-"

I looked down and Rose, who was looking back at me with an expression of undiluted concern. My eyes wandered to her tail which hang lazily from her backside. The flames on her tail were tepid. Her body heat, was normal. I soon realized my breathing had become heavy and my chest was rising and falling. All of it exaggerated. My body was acting on its own. Completely separate from my thoughts and my will. As soon as I realized it, I felt my composure fracture and begin to fall to pieces. Confusion banished any other thought from my mind. One thought consumed every other one. Eventually, there was only one thing bounding around inside my skull.

What the hell is going on?

Rose, still clinging to me, turned her head and shouted at the other two, "Get to the train. Now!"

The seriousness in her voice shook the three of us. Her playful tomboyish tone, was not there. For once in a long time, she was earnest. Her eyes were wild, fierce, determined, but almost... scared.

“Go! Get the train runnin'!”

Chris was the first one to move. She didn't ask any questions, she merely gave a quick salute. However, her expression did break. Her brows furrowed and I immediately read it as: 'But I don't know how to do that'

“What is going on here, Rose?” Susan asked, her voice straining to sound composed, but her expression told a different story.

Things were not going as planned, they were going far from what was planned. For a straight laced and organized girl like her, that was the worst possible thing for her psyche there is.

“Go! Get the train running.” Rose shouted at her in response.

Before the Anubis could get another word in edgewise, Rose nodded to Chris and with a buffet of wind, her wings spread and she lifted into the air. Her talons seized Susan by the shoulders and whisked her away. Up above, then down toward the waiting train and its idle engines. If there was anyone who had a chance to figure out how to get them working by chance... It was her.

But why leave the two of us here? It was clear as day that there was danger. Danger very close at hand.

“Rose?” I asked timidly. “Why didn't I-”

She shushed me and then went quiet before answering quietly, “The moment you move... You'll be dead.”

This wasn't the usual frivolousness from Rose. She meant what she said. It wasn't a guess. It wasn't a threat. It was a warning. There was something beyond our control here and we couldn't even begin to comprehend it. All we knew, was that it was near, it was imminent and it was deadly. My body tried on its own to flee, twitching involuntarily as energy surged into my legs which tried to break out into a sprint at every opportunity. But Rose's grip did not break, and she held onto me tight, bolting me to the spot whenever my composure faltered.

Once Susan's protests were too far away to hear, there was silence. Except for my raspy breaths, out-of-control heartbeat that is. The flow of time seemed to have become distorted, I wasn't sure if my perception of it had sped up and that my heartbeats hadn't changed at all, or time had come to standstill. My internal clock had a wrench thrown between the cogs and the springs, I could only watch the shadows crawl across the ground as the dawn sun, burning blood red, crept over the horizon.

The only other thing that broke the monotony of my escalating madness was Rose's own breathing. Her chest that was pressing up against arm. Her clawed hand had also inched its way to the hilt of her sword securely locked inside the scabbard on her back, and the grinding of steel on the hardened leather as she started to slowly to

pull unsheathe it.

Without a word, without a gesture of warning, Rose's arm that was wrapped around my own catapulted me from the spot. I didn't even get the chance to scream as I was flung into the air. I left behind an exploding inferno as Rose's tail erupted, fueling her burst of superhuman strength. I sailed for about six meters and came crashing down on some nearby burlap sacks, upside down.

The bags exploded on impact and I found myself with my legs dangling in the air, my head on the cold ground and my back sunk into an infinite number of seeds. Cabbage, if I had to hazard a guess. Small, hard, like a million little ball bearings. At least they didn't break my back. What I heard as I was sailing through the air, on account of me not screaming, was the sound of weapons clashing. When my vision refocused, I saw two figures before me. It took a second longer on account everything was flipped, but there was Rose and then someone else entirely. It wasn't Chris, it wasn't Susan, it was draped in brown. A small brown cloaked figure, about the same stature and size as Rose, but from the two sleeves in the cloak, were two meter long curved green blades. The cutting edges appeared to be on the opposite side, but there were also serrated with large nasty teeth.

The figure with the twin blades was still suspended in the air during that brief moment in time. All the force of her attack was pushing downward at a forty-five degree angle and Rose was pushing back up. Rose's sword was caught between the cross point of the twin blades which made an 'X' which was being pushed back and forth between them. It was almost as though the stranger had dropped down from above. Except for the roof behind us, which is unlikely given the angle the two were engaged in, there was simply no way the assailant could have done that.

Gravity got the better of me and I slid from my landing spot and rolled onto the ground. For how hard and far Rose threw me, I wasn't hurt at all, so I easily stood back up, but I had to struggle with shaking knees all the same. I wish I hadn't.

Once I stood up, only five meters away from the clash, Rose let out a war-cry and pushed with all her might against the stranger in the brown cloak. A blur of brown fluttered away, but spun in mid flight and landed on its feet without a problem. It was at that moment, when the stranger stood tall once again, I saw the shadow under the cowl swivel in my direction. It happened in slow motion. I couldn't even make out the face, let alone the form, of the stranger underneath that tattered brown fabric, but I could tell the eyes under there were focused squarely on me. I could feel them burn through the space between us and straight into my very being.

If looks could kill.

That is exactly what that gaze felt like. Pure, unfiltered killing intent. I could feel sweat pool under my arms and soak my forehead, my bangs sticking and matting on my head. My heart felt like an icy cold hand had seized it and started to squeeze tight. Like someone who was suffocating. My heart beat faster in response, desperate to breathe. Breathing became hard, and I couldn't help but speed them up and draw them deeper. I felt as though I was on the verge of hyperventilating just from that gaze. If I didn't, if I stood idly by, that stare would freeze the blood in my veins. This was the exact same feeling from before, only worse. But I didn't even have to know of the gaze owner's existence. An instinctual, bestial like instinct, a sixth sense of prey, sensed the predator long before it revealed itself. The presence of this stranger was on that level.

Rose dug her talons into the stone and took up a defensive stance. She then circled around and put herself between myself and the assailant. Even then that gaze didn't break. It was as though this stranger barely recognized Rose's existence. That treads the fine line between bravery and stupidity. I've seen what Rose is capable of and ignoring her like that was just not a good idea. Not if you wanted to last more than a few seconds in a fight... But perhaps this stranger wasn't here for a fight...

All I had to do was blink to set off the next cascade of events. I nearly fell over backwards when the brief flutter of darkness had the stranger leaping from her position and straight toward me. It didn't concern her that Rose was in the way, like a speeding arrow, she blew right past Rose who was still standing there, claws dug into the ground, sword held in front of her.

I don't think Rose expected it either, she didn't even flinch until the brown cloak was already fluttering past her. The strangers target wasn't her though, it was me. I still couldn't see the eyes, but I could feel their stare through the hood. The flash of brown was already half past Rose before I sensed Rose's knees bent and she started to react. From a standing position of about four meters from Rose, the stranger made her second foot fall. All of it in just one leap. One silent and lightning fast leap. With a tap barely louder than a cat's footstep, the cloak pushed off the ground and flung itself like an arrow at me. Trailing behind, two razor sharp looking blades. If those touched me, I'd die. That's what my gut told me. My guts that would soon be spread all over the ground soon after.

But as the cloak was about to rocket toward me after touching off the ground, Rose's reactions were beyond human. Her actions couldn't have been planned, they were reactionary. One claw let go of her sword's hilt and snapped back. It wrapped around where the stranger's ankle must be and with her slender bicep, Rose flexed and

put all her strength into pulling that loosed arrow back.

I don't think either of them expected this development, but it was what Rose wanted, so that gave her the advantage. I felt the gaze break. When Rose's claw wrapped around its leg, I watched the neck snap to attention, the gaze, which was like a laser before, unfocused and looked beyond me. Despite how fast the stranger had launched forward, the weight must have been negligible, because the vector of approached flipped one hundred and eighty degrees immediately.

I'm sure Rose would have reeled in for the finishing blow, but even in mid flight, the stranger contorted into a counter-attack. With an audible, 'snick', the blades folded back from the wrists and against the forearms. With a backhanded elbow, the sharp edges would slice right through Rose's neck as the salamander swung her sword over with her free arm. Rose instead let go and launched the brown cloak right back where it started... and beyond.

A second explosion from Rose's tail sent the stranger flying through the air, but it merely tucked in and somersaulted through the air. A two point landing while crouched and skidding across the ground eventually brought itself to a complete stop only a couple meters from where the stranger began.

I felt relief, if only because the gaze had been lifted. The eyes under the cowl swirled toward Rose who was standing tall before me and instead of hesitating, I heard her chuckle instead.

“That's right. You want a swipe at my husband?... You're gonna have to go through me first.” She taunted.

She slid one talon back and took up another more balanced stance instead of a defensive one; ready to attack if the cloak tried to blockade run past her again. The stranger didn't respond; except for another pair of snicks that sounded off as the blades swung back and returned to their previous position, like two arm blades naturally extending from the wrists.

“Laven. You need to run. While I have her pinned.”

My heart sunk hearing those words again, “Rose! I-”

“Not know, Laven!... She's not here for me.”

No. This certainly isn't like before. I'm the target here. If I stay here, this stranger will withdraw to take another swipe at me at every opportunity... If I'm close by like this... That will be often.

Another tap and the brown cloak launched itself at Rose. It didn't happen when I blinked, so I saw the legs hidden underneath that cloak crouch down, coil up like a spring and then launch forward, like a bullet. In mid flight, the blades spun around like a tornado. The difference in the air pressure passing over and under those arm blades, caused a sound unlike a whoosh and more like a series of metallic chimes. Rose's sword met the spinning death head on, but the

force this time was enough to budge even Rose. When she counter-attacked, the cloak twisted out-of-the-way like liquid flowing through fingers. From a spin in another swipe with one blade, blocked by Rose, but then the other clamping down on Rose's sword in a pincer like grip. I watched as the other elbow of the stranger tweaked, and the blades ground against Rose's sword. I thought I saw sparks fly, but whatever was supposed to happen, didn't. The brown cloaked soon realized it too, but it was too late to pull away when Rose booted the assailant in the chest and sent her target flying backward.

Sparks flew as the three blades ground against one another like whetstones, but the stranger once again landed perfectly on the ground a couple of meters away, seemingly unharmed. I think that last attack was meant to break a weapon, but that sword I entrusted Rose with was not made of any material anyone of this world would know. That blunder cost the initiative and Rose charged in and swung hard diagonally. This time one arm blade had to stop the savage blow as Rose's tail exploded in an inferno behind her with every clash of blades. The exchange was fast and furious. One swing by Rose was met with a parry and a thrust from the other blade. A thrust Rose swung her torso out-of-the-way of and chained her previous attack with her next that the stranger had to flip backwards to ignore before trying to connect a roundhouse kick to Rose's head which she ducked under to continue her charge.

It didn't take me long to figure out Rose's plan. She was pushing the stranger back. The distance between myself and their melee was increasing with every clash, so when Rose and the stranger locked blades again and pushed against one another, spinning round and round, trying to trip one another, I turned around and fled.

If Rose and my suspicions were correct, then she had no interest in Rose further than having to get past her to get to me. If that's so, I'm safer making the run for it while I can and Rose is safer at the same time. Our only option now was to get that train going. Get it to full speed and get out of here. If Rose could hold her off, Chris could always fly back and pick her up later. Susan and I could manage to keep that train going if she could get it started.

Once again, I was experiencing an all too familiar feeling. Throwing myself headlong in a sprint away from danger. I ran down the paths and leapt over edges for every few seconds worth of shortcut that I could. I ran amongst the equipment, the cranes, the rails and the crates. I ran at a full sprint to cross the empty shipping and train yard, luckily my lungs and heart better suited than they ever were before. Gravel kicked up under my feet and with a stroke of luck I came across a grain chute which bypassed three whole levels. It was like an old

school yard slide, before they replaced them with cheap plastic ones. Removed them for safety reasons, did they? How ironic. My descent was met with a pile of shucked grain that broke my momentum. I climbed out and ignored the granules stabbing into my feet in my shoes and jostling in my clothes as I sprinted along the lowest level of the yard, the train past the station far in the distance.

But then I felt a pang. It wasn't in my lungs. It wasn't in my heart or legs. It was in the back of my head. It began as a pang, but soon turned into a chill that went down my spine and then became a pain that ran throughout every nerve in my body. Every time my foot touched off against the ground, I felt a shock wave of pain shoot up my core and I soon tripped as I lost my balance. The gravel caused my ankle to roll slightly and what had to be an imaginary pain was soon replaced by an all too real one. I hit the ground, but as I did, I heard an all too sinister sound that was too close by.

A snick. A metallic chime and then shattering stone.

I hit the dirt, my momentum causing me to keep rolling and rolling until I finally came to a stop several meters away. When I finally stopped, and as I lay there on the ground, I looked up and saw a brown cloak kneeling on the ground where I was. A single blade stabbed up to the wrist into the ground.

That shouldn't be possible. I had cleared well past half the yard... Yet here the brown cloaked stranger was. The tatters were all the same, it couldn't be another one, it was the same person from before. The cowl slowly looked up from the point of impact and the same gaze pieced my very soul. Adrenaline was coursing through my veins, so my flight or fight kicked in immediately. I scrambled to my feet and broke back out into a sprint. But I only got about a dozen or so more meters away before I felt a stabbing pain shock me to my core through my ankle and I fell forward and onto all fours.

The stranger was very calm. I sense no hurry, no emotions. The arm merely pulled back and freed the blade from the earth and stood tall. The footsteps were likewise very calm, very slow and deliberate. As though there was no rush. When the strike did come, it would instantaneous. I'm not sure I'd even see it happen.

Despite that, I started to shuffle backward. I pushed off with my good leg and scooted backwards, keeping pace with every slow step forward. I could hear and feel the gravel underneath me, but the foot falls of the assassin were absolutely silent. The stranger merely watched very carefully as we kept about twenty meters distance between each other. I saw half that distance cleared in the time it takes to blink, so that distance meant pretty much nothing at a time like this.

My breathing and heartbeat was erratic, but I still continued to scoot myself backward. I wasn't even looking where I was going

anymore and that's when I placed my right hand into something wet. Something I wasn't expecting to feel on a dry gravelly yard. When I held it up to my face and felt it between my fingers, it had a slightly sticky consistency and was also red. Blood red. It was a pool of it and it flowed from one place. A dead man, one hidden away in the shadows, sitting down, his head slumped forward, his back up against a wall... Two puncture wounds in the chest, narrow and wide enough to be from these stranger's blades. I couldn't make out the man's face, but from his clothes, they certainty didn't look like a dock workers, and they looked casual. What gave it away was the ring on his finger. A sigil of a lion; one of Xavier's men.

So, they had been here. Someone just got here before we did.

While I was busy freaking out about stumbling upon a corpse, the stranger had already begun to slowly close the distance. But when I tried to back away again, my back hit something solid. Of course, the man was dead and propped up against a large wooden container. I too, had hit my dead end. However, next to that pool of blood was my last saving grace. The dead man's crossbow.

With a large wooden rectangle sticking out from the top and a large lever in the rear, it was a repeating crossbow. The ingenuity of the people in this empire kept astounding me. At times they seemed so basic and backwards, then again, they surprise me with bursts of marvel and engineering.

I threw myself at the weapons and pulled myself back up, still sitting on the ground and unable to stand with my ankle now starting to swell. I rattled and banged my palm against the magazine and heard the clatter of bolts inside. I then turned my eyes toward the brown cloaked figure who was slowly approaching. It didn't even hesitate upon seeing me armed. I'd have to gamble on that hubris.

I pulled the lever back, the magazine slid back and caught on the bowstring. Gripping the body tightly with my left hand, I the body crossbow steady, at eye level and aimed. I let go of the lever and wrapped my finger around the trigger. I squeezed it tightly and the bolt went flying. The assassin didn't even budge. The bolt flew about thirty centimeters wide of the body.

I gauged the trajectory and having a better feel for the weapon I pulled the lever back and notched another bolt. I took closer aim and let the second bolt fly. This time it was on the mark, but the brown cloak only had to touch her shoulder with the side of the head. Where the head had been before, the bolt pierced through the brown cowl instead and kept on flying down the yard where it eventually stuck into the gravel. It was square on the face, but hit nothing but air. The absolute minimum amount of effort needed to dodge the missile that would have been nothing but fatal.

I pulled back on the lever again, but nothing notched. In a panic and banged my fist against the magazine and heard just one object rattle around inside. I knocked on it until it fell to the bottom and I pulled the lever back one more time. It was the last missile. I slowly looked up and the stranger was only a few seconds from being right on top of me. From my low angle, I was able to see for the first time, a dull light underneath that cowl. A pair of dull indigo colored eyes. Cold, merciless, emotionless. They were the eyes of a killer. All this time I had felt them through the fabric and seeing them unfiltered for the first time was nearly enough to driver me over the edge. But I bit my lip and breathed deeply. I raised the crossbow once again and took aim.

But was there a point?

I felt the muscles in my arm go lax. I had just seen how useless the last bolt was. I wasn't going to hit now. I knew that was true, deep down inside, no matter how much my desire to survive spurred me on. I looked to the left and then to the right. There was nothing in one direction and the previous victim in the other. The magazine had run empty faster than I thought, so this guy probably met a very similar end.

So I did something else. I looked up.

Hanging above the yard were the cranes. Moving goods from one container to the other. Rails coming from the north, the lake, unloading into containers bound south. Rails heading in the opposite direction. I looked up and saw one cloth basket hanging about ten meters above the ground, bulging at the seams. I grinned and aimed my crossbow up. Lining the makeshift sight, the top of the magazine I aimed for the rope holding the basket up. I took a deep breath and as I exhaled I squeezed the trigger.

The bolt flew upwards with a twang. I watched as the steel tip came into contract with on of the bundles of fibers making up the whole rope. I watched as it passed through. There was barely audible rip as the bundles of fibers tore, but only a part of the rope. That wasn't the last of it though. A couple snaps a second until they started sounding off in rapid succession. The weight started to pull down on fewer and fewer strands until they became loud twangs. The brown cloak was standing just in front of my, with one blade ready when a few pieces of chaff floated down and came to rest on the top the assassin’s head.

“Gotcha.” I said, tired.

One loud snap was the last it could handle. A large basket made of burlap fell from above like a sandbag. Filled to the brim with grain. The cowl looked upward, the knees dropped down, but it was too late. The stranger wasn't faster than gravity. With a thump, a few hundred kilos of grain formed a cone where the assassin was just a

moment ago.

I dropped the crossbow and using the wall as a crutch, I pulled myself back off the ground. My ankle still felt a little tender. So I unwrapped some bandages around my arm and quickly tied some around it. Susan's miracle linen worked wonders. The deadening of the tissue's nerves allowed me to put my weight back on it. I wouldn't have to limp away from the scene.

“Laven!” I heard a scream come from across the yard.

Rose was approaching quickly at a full sprint. I was immediately relieved. She was right. The assassin would break loose at the first chance. We put up a good effort, but in the end I just got lucky. But as Rose got closer, she wasn't slowing down. She leapt at me with her arms stretched out. I barely had enough time to catch her as her weight slammed into me, we spun around and my back slammed into the back of the container with Rose clinging from my chest.

“Laven! That was, awesome!” She glowed, the serious expression of hers having been buried. “Where did you learn to shoot like that?”

I paused. “I. I don't know...”

That was just a lucky shot. Wasn't it? I don't ever remember firing a cross-

My felt my heart stop. An all too familiar feeling welled up inside my chest and I felt a cold sweat ooze out from underneath my perspiration. No. Not possible. Not after- Not so soon.

I felt a pressure bury itself into me. A gaze from a pair of eyes I could not see. Rose picked up on it immediately. She put away her cheerfulness once again and separated from me, prepared to draw her sword again.

“After all that...” She growled as she faced the conical pile of grain.

Yet she hesitated to pounce and run her sword into the pile. Likewise, she also hesitated on lighting it on fire. Stabbing blindly, opening yourself to a counter-attack. Creating smoke, blinding yourself to the enemy... Whoever that was, that person is not yet past-tense.

From the distance, a loud whistle broke the silence of the morning air. Just as the sun started to fully appear over the horizon and the light of day had come with the morning.

That's a train whistle if I ever heard one. Those two must have got it running somehow.

“Rose! Come on, forget em! We'll take the chance to get out of here!”

I didn't wait for a confirmation or a protest. I turned and ran toward the source of the whistle. Continuing to run across the yard. I

hoped that the bandage would hold and whatever magic within it worked long enough to carry myself at a sprint. I could hear Rose following close behind me as we burst through a pair of doors into what appeared like a station. There I saw more bodies, each of them dressed casually like the one before. Each of them were armed, but all just as dead as their friend outside. There wasn't any time to pay respects, I kept running.

As we hurdled over the obstacles littered in our way, I heard another whistle, loud and clear and the creaking of wood. Something was rolling. I shoulder checked another pair of doors and broke them open as I crashed through and finally I came to the main platform. In the distance, the train of cars was already slowly building up steam. It was only at a walking pace, but that would soon change if those two girls stuck with the plan.

I chased after the caboose and leaped from the platform and tangled myself around the railing just outside the door leading into the caboose. I quickly threw myself over it and hit the floor hard. I didn't have any time to spare though. I scrambled back to my feet and saw Rose sprinting alongside the platform. A platform that was running out. The train was also accelerating more and more by the second. It was long past a walk, almost past a jog and almost ready to blow past a sprint.

“Rose! Jump!” I screamed.

I wrapped my still good foot around the railing and leaned over, balancing the pipe on my chest as I leaned over and held my hand out to Rose as close as I could get it. She grit her teeth and just as the platform dropped off, she put her knees into it and sailed through the air. I swung my hand out and a loud clap rang out as the palm of my hand met with the palm of her claw. I quickly pulled her in and we both collapsed over and on top of each other at the back of the caboose.

Rose didn't move at first. She hung over me on all fours, her claws next to each side of my face, her long red hair dangling down above my face. Her amber crocodile eyes looked into mine as we both heaved and let out all the pent of stress we had built up as our bodies unwound.

Then I chuckled. And so did she. When I broke out into a laugh so did she. We laughed until we both locked back at the station in the distance. Appearing on the tracks, just beyond the platform was someone cloaked in brown. The stranger somehow dug them self out of the pile of grain so quickly...

But we were approaching beyond 30 km/h and were almost more than a hundred meters away by now. Yet... In the distance, I saw the figure start sprinting. As I was sliding out from under Rose also got back to her feet.

It started off slow, but the figure was... gaining. As we passed fifty kilometers per hour, the brown cloak was still gaining. With a form like an Olympic runner, our acceleration wasn't keeping up with the acceleration of our pursuer.

I shook my head, “There's no way...”

“Husband... Get back.” Rose warned.

I didn't need to be warned twice. I turned around and threw the sliding door at the back of the caboose open. When I turned around our pursuer had gained on us even more, but as we approached eighty kilometers per hour it finally seemed we were matched. No one can run that fast for long... But I keep forgetting where I am and where I woke up.

Slowly but surely the distance began to increase as we just passed ninety kilometers per hour, but it seemed our acceleration was finally coming to an end. Our speed had leveled off. The distance between us was within fifty meters or so now, they'd tired eventually... Right? I'm sure that's what our purser thought too. A different approach was taken to the problem. The sprinting came to a sudden stop, but the forward momentum did not.

Rose yelled something and I jumped back as Rose rushed backward to push me out-of-the-way. With a hop, skip and a jump, our pursuer went air borne. The brown cloak slipped off, unable to handle the winds that were rushing past. Above the sound of the rushing wind that was blowing past us as we rumbled down the track, was a buzzing sound. A pair giant pair of translucent insect like wings were beating god knows how many times per second behind the assassin hot on our heels. It wasn't flight, it was more like a jet pack, but it had the same result. After kicking off the ground, the wings propelled the assassin toward the caboose at breakneck speed.

I tumbled backward as Rose jumped back to cover me. The pair of arm blades at the end of the assassin’s arms dug into the back of the caboose like icepicks. I finally got a clear look at our stranger. A woman, but far from human. With one last straining effort, she pulled herself free and landed softly on edge of the caboose rear platform.

She was about as tall as Rose, with a lithe and slender form. From both wrists, meter long curved and serrated blades swung back with a 'snitch' against her forearms. Resting securely on green chitinous shells encasing the top of her forearms like vambraces. Beyond those wrists were normal small and girlish human hands.

Her chest (a b-cup if I had to guess) and neck was covered in a skin tight and opaque green bodysuit. The girl's shoulders and the sides of her torso were covered in the same green carapace like exoskeleton and underneath that suit. There appeared to be supple human skin, taut with stringy muscle that held tight to her feminine and

alluring curves. Like an Olympic swimmer. The suit itself tattered at near the waist into a sort of skirt where her long legs began, her thighs exposed, but hiding underneath the white smooth skin, incredible muscle. They'd have to, to propel herself air borne as she does. Her shins and calves were encased in the same chitinous armor as her forearms and her petite human feed clothed in the same body suit material as her hands.

It was elsewhere her form drastically diverged from a human's. An extension of her spine led into an insect's abdomen. Long, narrow, cylindrical, it was shaped just like a praying mantis'. A pair of membranes retracted soon after she landed, they folded the beautiful glistening translucent insect wings underneath. The wings themselves, four in total spread out almost as wide as her body was tall. Twitching atop her head were a pair of long green setaceous antenna that twirled about the top of her head, feeling the air surrounding her. Adorning her head was chestnut brown hair, in a short girly cut that reached down no further than her chin, but it wasn't just the antenna, but the extra sets of eyes sticking out from her hair. Two large yellow colored compound eyes. They rested on the sides of her head and curved enough around so that they could peer behind her, in addition to two smaller yellow compound eyes no larger than a quarter between the larger of the two and above her eyebrows, nestled in the hair line.

I was once again captivated by the elegant beauty of the form these monstrous women take, her small bridged nose, cheek bones and chin radiated supernatural beauty. Her lips were tight and level, without a hint of emotion and the eyes spoke nearly an identical story. Except those eyes carried with it a more primal terror. They were a deep indigo, but they were cold, lifeless, fiercely stoic and focused. They fit the face of an assassin. Her chest rose and fell, but her face never changed. It was also still drilling into me with the same intensity as before. Only I was left more confused than terrified like I was before.

I hate being a sucker for a pretty face. Even when it belongs to someone out to kill me. Someone we're now trapped on a train traveling at a hundred kilometers per hour.

Just my luck.

Chapter 58

Between the iron rails, the wagons clattered and rocked to-and-fro, the curves in the line were few and far between, but the quality of the cars riding upon them were questionable at best. The expectations of speed from the modern world hadn't quite left me yet, mostly because of the breakneck speeds Chris herself was capable of, but the scenery passing us by now as we rolled down the tracks near a hundred kilometers per hour made our assassin's pursuit even more mind boggling to me. Yet there she stood.

Two human legs carried her at a ninety kilometer per hour sprint for almost a minute, yet she was still hardly breathing at all. Her shoulders heaved up and down only slightly as she breathed through her nose. She wasn't winded like I was and even Rose seemed slightly sapped from our mad dash to reach the train in time. I could feel the lactic acid coursing through my veins and paralyzing my muscles, straining them, stinging them, and it still took all I had just to stand. Even as the muscles in my thighs spasmed in protest and my knees nearly buckled, the assassin stepped off the platform and into the caboose. Rose seemed undeterred and just as determined as she was before, her sword was already drawn and she had placed herself between me and the assassin now waiting at the very edge of the caboose.

And from the edge of the caboose that same pressure from before was bearing down on me. The pressure of undistilled killing intent from her indigo colored eyes. The fear they invoked was primal. It came from deep within my reptilian brain. It didn't answer to logic, it only sensed there was something, someone, after my life. Like an oblivious monkey next to a bush with a tiger waiting inside. She was a predator and I was the prey. There would be no reasoning with her.

Her deathly stare came through a pair of thin almond eyes with blackish-grey bags under them, probably from sleep deprivation. The girl hasn't slept in some time, maybe not since choosing me as her target... Or more frightening: after someone had sent her after me. I felt that was the more likely story and when I was able to tear my eyes away from her steely death stare I saw the most compelling evidence of all: A leather belt, a collar with a thin chain of silver. A pendant hanging down from it, swaying back and forth over the manubrium of the sternum where the collar bones meet. An emerald green arc, the size of my smallest finger, with a large five point gold star embedded in the middle. I've seen that shining star before and it has always been associated with one thing alone.

The Church of the Almighty.

Monsters used by the Church to hunt down and eliminate other

monsters... And their mate. I recall a situation like this before. But this girl standing there, alone, seemed like she was on a whole other level. It was as though we had been given a surprise invitation to the big leagues which we could not refuse.

The mantis girl's lower abdomen shivered as her wings flickered out and then back in with quick buzzes until the wings were properly folded away once again. Two pairs of paper thin and translucent membranes that glistened and sparkled while the dawn sun shone through them. They refracted the light like a prism, an illusion of tranquility, a terribly beautiful rainbow was painted on her wings. Four insectoid like wings that managed to propel herself at incredible speeds, like a projectile from a slingshot. Whatever anatomy was involved in those wings, it was likely they couldn't grant her true flight, but launching yourself at an opponent with speeds like that in a surprise attack was equally effective.

But it was the blades currently folded back against her forearms that was the deadliest part of all. Each just over one meter long, slightly curved and the sharpened side and tip a match for any bladed weapon made of iron. Their green color, the same as her chitin, told me they were bone. The way they freely moved told me they were not accessories; they were part of her. And just like a mantis, her speed was lightning fast, almost undetectable to my eyes. She took a couple steps forward, slowly, just like a predator slowly creeping up on its pray. Her footsteps absolutely silent and her body rocking back and forth gently along with the train cars tumbling across the tracks underneath: Just like a mantis mimicking a leaf blowing in the wind.

She would have her work cut of for her, Rose had already risen to her feet, drawn her sword and stood in her path.

“Ready for round two then?” She said defiantly with a grin on her face. “There ain't gonna be cheating by runnin' away this time.”

Rose was right. The caboose was only about two and a half meters wide and only another two high. The inside was cluttered with wire bunk-bed frames and a corner for serving preparation. There was no room for the assassin to get around Rose, other than right through her. When those steely eyes suddenly switched from me to Rose, I knew that it was fact. I could feel the relief instantaneously, her predator eyes were lifted from me and placed onto Rose: the obstacle currently in her path.

“Yeah. That's it.” Rose said, positively beaming.

I could only catch the side profile of her face, but her expression was looking almost demented. Eyes wide open, her slit pupils thin and focused and her sharp toothy grin taking up half her face. Her tail whipped and cracked like a whip behind her, spitting embers like a crackling campfire.

The assassin stood opposed of her, the complete opposite. Her steely gaze and straight tight lipped expression hadn't changed at all. A face that looked disinterested in everything it looks upon. She wore tired eyes, but it was a lie. Her scythes which were folded back on her forearms snapped back into position with a snick. Even the antenna on top of her head stopped feeling around, each one about forty centimeters long, the only movement came from her tattered bodysuit around her waist, a skirt fluttering and shaking with the bouncing of the cart along the railroad.

A fiery salamander and icy mantis stared each other down, exchanging invisible blows. A slight shift from resting their weight on their left leg to their right, their eyes shifting to spot a weakness in the other, the clenching of their fists and the rhythm of their breathing. They were both searching for one of them to drop their guard and open themselves up to the initial charge. It was a little too early for a duel at high noon, but the tension was the same. The only thing that was missing was the Spanish symphony in a spaghetti western playing in the background.

Rose held her longsword forward like a fencer's foil with her left claw half clenched next to her face. Her tail swaying rhythmically behind her, the fire burning on its ridge crackling and spitting embers every few seconds. The talons of her feet gently scrapping the wood paneled floor as she kept her knees loose and limber, ready to lunge into action. She flourished her sword in her right hand, twirling it around her wrist. To distract her? To bluff and show off just how wide her defense reached? I didn't know.

When the tension finally broke, each girl threw themselves at the other. They met at the point halfway between them and it was met with a mighty crash of bone and steel. Rose's sword swung downward, blocked and being held at bay by one scythe, the mantis' other blade being held off to the side by Rose who had stepped within the assassin’s guard and had a grip on the mantis' wrist. The longsword came pressing down nearer and nearer to the mantis' head, but at the same time her right scythe curled inward till the point came closer and closer to the side of Rose's head. They appeared evenly matched, until the intensity of the flame on Rose's tail kicked up to the next level.

The mantis' held arm was being pulled down and the edge of Rose's sword inched closer to her face. But her steely gaze didn't falter even once. Her brows furrowed, the only thing that betrayed any effort the mantis was putting into the fight. She waited patiently, and when the opportunity presented itself, she placed one kick to the side of Rose's knee which caused it to buckle for just a moment. But that moment was long enough. Her weight shifted and she lost the advantage in leverage. Her arm struggled and came back up and the

blade lined up to skewer Rose's neck if it wasn't stopped. Her sword that she was a moment ago pressing down slipped and now she was locked with and holding back the other scythe that was now bearing down on her. The game of tug-o-war had shifted in only a blink of the eye.

A battle crazed salamander is hardier than that though; Rose's tail slumped down to the floor and she used the muscles within it to push her whole body back at the assassin. She pounced forward and her knee collided with the mantis square in the stomach. The force of the blow threw the girl backward and they separated once again, but that lasted for hardly a second.

Recovery was instantaneous for both and they clashed again, exchanging blow after blow, parry, thrust bob and weave. The assassin was far faster, her attacks relentless and strung together without any hesitation. Rose's attacks were comparatively slower, but carried more weight behind them. If I had to hazard a guess, I would also say that Rose's skill and technique was also superior. It would have to be, even with just one blade, she was holding back a whirlwind in a tight space with relative ease. Her grin hadn't gone anywhere, there wasn't any worry on her face at all. Rather, she seemed to be enjoying herself immensely.

The two of them disengaged again, only to reset the initiative and for the assassin to lunge forward again with her incredible speed. Rose angled her blade and let the thrust scrap past the flat of her blade, sending a couple sparks flying on contact, but she didn't stop mid turn. Instead she pirouetted on the spot, her tail coiling around one of the posts of the bunk bed frames. A groaning screech of metal on wood like nails on chalkboard echoed inside the caboose. The frame was pulled between the two, acting like a barrier. That didn't stop the assassin though, she thrust forward through the barrier with her other scythe, but that must have been what Rose was waiting for. She dodged the thrust, then slammed her sword on top of the wire frame then kicked the bottom out and turned it over. The metal warped around the scythe, an extra twenty kilos of twisted metal attached to her arm.

A distinctive advantage if I ever saw one and a plan I hadn't expected from Rose. I'm mostly impressed she pulled it off. Maybe it worked just because of how outlandish and crazy it was?

Tearing and shearing metal soon replaced any sense of accomplishment. Every twisted pipe and strip of metal that came into contract with the serrated edge of her arm scythes gave way like a hot knife through butter and she was easily able to pull her arm free, leaving a clattering pile of metal to fall onto the floor. For better or worse, the only thing accomplished was measuring just how sharp and

durable those chitinous edges really were. Rose seemed rather relieved though, as if she would have been disappointed if that was all it would have taken.

“Oho?” She said, cocking her eyebrow.

With the barrier nothing but slag between them, they threw themselves back into the fray. The assassin kept getting faster and faster to the point her arms moved like blurs and Rose's tail burned hotter and hotter as she got more and more worked up. That was the dangerous part about Rose. The more she fights, the harder she fights. Like how a candle burns the brightest before it goes out, but fighting that flame with fire only spurs it onward and stirs it back to life with more vigor than before.

The assassin kept charging, twirling around like the gusts of wind from a storm and Rose refused to yield and always pushed back to reclaim whatever ground she lost. From the flurry of blows, spurts and trails of blood from both of the assailants spattered as trivial cuts and scrapes was all either could do to the other. But the mantis' cold expression was now slightly twisted, her lips were barely parted, but I could see her grit teeth as she strained in vain to cut her way past Rose.

The speed of her blades, the way they vibrated as they passed through the air, gave off a metallic chime with every swipe and on each forceful impact of their blades, Rose's tail exploded and power flowed into her muscles. The mantis' strength could not budge her. Rose could easily repel each swing with only one hand on the hilt. Only the rapidity of her attacks that forced Rose to change her guard could put the salamander on her heels. Those gains were obliterated with an explosion from Rose and the heat alone was probably enough to cause the assassin to retreat.

Rose could hold her here, but if we didn't take advantage of that... Then this was all an exercise in futility. If this assassin follows us all the way, we will have no rest or respite. We could fight her, we could try to defeat her, but that was the last option in a list of many that were beginning to swirl around inside my head. The cost of fighting her might be grievous injuries. Injuries we cannot wait to heal. Maybe even wounds serious enough that they can't be made to heal...

But Rose was playing a game of chance. A simple case of Murphy's Law: the more attacks the assassin delivered, the closer the probability that one would get through would approach one. That one blow finally landed on Rose's arm, near the back of the elbow on her right arm, just above where her red scales merged into the smooth human skin. The Mantis' body had twisted mid swing, as flexible as ballet dancer, contorting and corkscrewing her arm blade past Rose's guard and landing the scythe blade where the tendons of her sword

arm were.

A bloody cut, through the skin and teasing the muscles underneath. Rose's face contorted in pain and a desperate counter-attack only just sent the Mantis leaping backward near the rear end of the caboose. I noticed the extent of the damage immediately. The grip in Rose's right claw slackened and blood trailed down her arm and began to pool on the floor below. But after the initial sting, Rose's expression refused to change. Instead, her ferocious grin intensified. She tossed the sword into her waiting left claw and once again flourished it around her wrist like she had done moments before.

There was a time limit now on how long Rose could hold her here. It would be naïve of me to think that Rose could carry this on forever. The mantis was turning her efforts not in defeating Rose, but merely disabling her. All she had to do was get past her for just a couple of seconds and plunge her blades in me. This assassin was not here to be entertained, like how Rose was now enjoying herself. But I knew for a fact that she'd hold her ground till the death.

“Laven, husband... You need to get going. It's going to get a little crazy in here.” She said.

“Hold up-” I tried to say, but I was quickly interrupted.

“It's gonna get hot in here and you're gonna get burned standing there... You already got a plan, don't cha?”

She still had one eye on the Mantis, who had stopped her assault and was most likely calculating her next attack after seeing she failed to deal the crippling blow with the last one. Rose turned her head to show me one eye. One half crazed amber eye, the crocodilian pupil with the same feeling of weight to it as the other girl. But that lunatic eye was actually reassuring. Maybe that just showed I was far from the only sane person here, because seeing that expression on her face filled me with courage.

If Rose could hold back the assassin and I got a chance to make a break for it... Then the best option to get away from this mantis girl would be to decouple the train. We'd carry on our way and the other cars would eventually grind to a halt. We could then put days between us. Chris could fly back and pick up Rose afterward and she could certainly fly faster than the mantis could run and there's no way she could run like that all day long... Yes, that was our best bet. I would just have to put my faith in Rose just as she was not putting hers in me.

“Yeah.... That's right. Hold her back!” I shouted earnestly.

“Got it!” She then looked back at the mantis, no doubt with a wide grin on her face. “Sorry this took so long, with you being so into this since the start, but let's get serious!”

Rose held her injured arm up and placed the blade of her

sword near the guard over her wound. She then flexed back her forearm and squeezed the blade against her bicep. Then she pulled the sword loose, now coated and dripping in the blood that was still oozing from the wound. Her fingers on her right claw twitched and flexed as they came back to life along with her tail building up into an inferno I had not seen in quite some time. The wound on her arm sizzled as the wound cauterized and stopped bleeding. White scar tissue skin that quickly tanned and melted back into her smooth skin where the cut had been before. A superficial first aid treatment, but she was leading with her left arm for now anyways.

I took her warning to heart and I turned around and headed for the other door exiting the caboose. It was padlocked and I had no key, so I kicked it out by hammering my foot against the door just above the handle. Three brutal kicks later it finally splintered and the bolts holding the lock mechanism underneath were then useless after one more. One hard pull with all my strength and I yanked the door from its hinges.

As I rushed through the door, I watched as Rose appeared to go super nova. I must have almost blinded myself watching it. Her tail exploded into a true raging inferno and the blood coated over her sword lit up as well, sheathing the blade in roaring flames. The metal slag around her heated up, almost becoming molten lead as the wood caught fire under each footstep she took. The tip of her sword that dragged along the ground leaving a line of fire and everything that came close to or into contact with her tail immolated. The heat from her body agitated the air surrounding her, causing an updraft that caused her long red pony tail to whip around wildly, all the while, the Mantis looking on as unsteady as her stoic face set in stone would allow her.

I now knew why she told me to get moving. I was on the other side of the now broken door, but I was sweating profusely from the heat. That heat distorted my image of the two fighters like a mirage. The temperature was a dry heat that was more at home in a desert at high noon. I doubt I'd last more than a minute till I was dead if I had stayed.

There was explosion after explosion behind me as I threw my shoulder into the door of the next car and bust it down. I didn't have the freedom to look behind me. I had to get to a safe distance and detach the cars behind me. As I cleared through the debris in my way and exited out the other side I came to the first coupling, only to find it locked. A panel was over the link pinto decouple it and once again, I was without a key.

“Well, with intelligent things in this world that can catch up with trains by running after them, of course they'd be a little paranoid..."

I groaned.

With nothing to pry it open with I vaulted over the edge of the next car. A half container with a tarp spread over what felt like sand or more likely salt beneath it. The taut fabric and unsteady ground make it extremely difficult. When I reached the opposite side, I was rewarded with yet another locked coupling. I kept running, fighting against the rocking ground underneath me and the fierce winds trying to push me backwards. I crawled, ran, leapt, through around and in car after car, but every one was firmly secured from a passerby kicking a lever and pulling a pin to send half or more of the cars behind.

If I couldn't decouple the cars, then I would have to make my way to the engines and get Susan or Chris' help. With that in mind, I leapt form the car to the next one. Through another fright wagon with a wooden sliding door blocking the way which I threw open. I slid it out-of-the-way like a man possessed and ran headlong inside, the sliding door on wheels rolled back after reaching its limit and rolled back into place, before it was obliterated into splinters.

A few chunks of what were once a door struck me in the shoulder and the force of them caused me to trip forward and hit the floor tumbling. When I came to a stop in the near darkness of the car, only lit by the few windows and the hole now open where I had come in from, I saw a familiar indigo gleam through the silhouette standing there; two scythe blades fully extended.

“No. You've got to be shitting me...” I said in a daze.

She wasn't completely steady on her feet, but she pressed onward and approached me, lying defenseless and prone on the floor. She was covered in black scorch marks and her brows were furrowed, angry, unlike how she was before. But those were the only differences. Maybe we were underestimating this assassin’s resolve?

But where was Rose?

My heart sank for a moment but I refused to believe it. She had slipped past her once before. She was a slippery customer and was far faster than Rose could ever hope to be. She was also dead-set on my death. She'd waste no time that wasn't necessary on Rose. She also seemed a little more rushed than normal, so I was going to take that to heart. My heart which was beating at an unhealthy speed on account of my imminent doom.

Being showered with splinters obviously wasn't enough, because the mantis approached the window above and next to me imploded and a hundred little pieces rained down inside the car with a crash. When I unshielded my eyes, a long green tail was lazily wagging back and forth above me and I didn't need to think too hard on what I had to do. As the mantis was readying to lunge at me, I reached up and wrapped my right hand firmly near the tip of the tail.

I hadn't always wanted to experience what it felt like to go from sitting to six Gs in under a second, but at that moment in time it was like a god send. The screaming wasn't my idea, it was more of a reflex beyond my control; on account that as I was whipped out from the car I very nearly came into the path of a tree beside the track. I was snapped backward, up and over the roof of the car before gravity took over and I slammed down on top of the car's sheet metal roof.

"There she rides / on a noble zephyr / so in her confide / your heroic endeavor!" Chris sang in Iambic Pentameter.

After hitting the roof hard, I found it difficult to breath, let alone speak. Instead I wheezed as I tried to get air back into my lungs while Chris looked on confused.

"Master? Are you okay?"

When I had finally got my breath back and I barely had the time to mutter, 'no', blade came slicing through the roof between my legs. A crushing force them grabbed hold of me by my shoulders and dragged me across the roof when a second blade came up through the roof where I had been lying down just a moment ago.

"Master?" Chris asked again.

"Just another assassin..." I said my voice still hoarse.

"Another?"

"It happens."

"Where is Rose?"

"Guarding the rear."

"From her?"

"From her... She's very fast."

We both watched, I through eyes stinging from the relentless wind blowing into my face as the train barreled onward down the tracks, as the two blades sliced with ease though the sheet metal roof in the shape of a circle.

"And sharp," Chris said dryly.

"That too," I nodded.

A circle wide a little wider than shoulder width apart fell free from the roof and even through all the wind roaring and the train car clattering, I could hear and feel it hitting the floor inside. Then with the grace of an acrobat, the mantis grabbed hold of the edge and flipped herself onto the roof, somersaulting and sticking yet another perfect ten point landing.

"Monstrous as well," Chris said.

"That also happens." I replied. "That's why it was awkward when we first met."

The mantis had reacquired her target, but now there was someone much taller and much bigger blocking her path. For someone who didn't lead her life with common sense, it made her very adaptable

to any situation. Nothing was too outlandish or completely unexpected. That includes a surprise high-stakes duel on top of a moving train.

“So?” Chris started loudly over the gusts. “The Shades behind the Shadows of Darkness have sent their agents at last!”

She declared while slamming one talon forward into the roof of the car. Pointing one wing out and the other forward she drew circles and patterns in the air, like a war dance... okay, let's not kid ourselves here: more like sentai ranger...

“If you seek Sir. Tamerlion's head, then it is me you must-”

From one end of the train car to the other, the Mantis leapt and brought both scythes to bear against Chris. Luckily, Chris wings were mostly in the way so she was able to parry both attacks, the scythes being parried off her forearms. The wyvern did not take kindly to being interrupted and with a disgruntled shout pushed back with her wings as the mantis still suspended in the air and threw the assassin clear across the car and back to the other side.

On the points of impact where the mantis had struck full force and dead on, there were two tiny gashes in Chris' scales. They appeared little more than paper cuts, but they still seeped tiny trails of blood, even though they quickly dried up and clotted. The sharpness of her blades however, was really driven home. I've watched as swords and arrows were easily turned away after coming into contact with those dragon scales, but those scythes seemed capable of cutting past them and to soft dermis underneath.

“I. Wasn't.... FINISHED!” Chris screamed as she yelled at the top of her lungs and threw herself recklessly at the mantis.

One, two steps and then taking airborne against the wind toward the mantis at incredible speed. Maybe the assassin thought it was to her benefit to try to skewer her as she approached so heedlessly, but I'm sure she realized just in time what I already know. She leapt backward, over the gap and onto the next car. Where she had taken up guard before, Chris' talons made short work of the sheet metal roof. Her razor sharp talons made coleslaw out of the metal which gave out an ear piercing screech as it was sundered.

She wasn't the only one with impossibly sharp edges. This one just had them, and more of them, attached to her feet instead.

This time it was the mantis who was on the defensive as Chris fury exploded. After tearing that part of the roof near the edge of the car to ribbons, she threw herself once again toward her.

“Why doesn't anyone let me finish?” She screamed once again. "Do you not realize how many waking hours I prepare for this?"

She took to the air, about seven meters high above the train roof and come back down spinning, her long tail whipping around like a string on a top until she opened back up with one talon which bore

down with a fearsome axe kick. The heel of Chris' right talon smashed down on the next cart where the wooden roof splintered and exploded like a dandelion's seed head in the wind. It failed to connect with the mantis, the mantis instead vaulted forward and pushed off the roof of the other car and back onto the one I was still lying down on. When she landed, she regained her footing and started running toward me. Blades ready.

There was no way I was going to out run her, but I didn't have to. An explosion of fire impacted into the roof in front of me. The mantis was forced to skid to a stop and leap back, then flip backward toward the edge of the car when a stream of flame, not unlike water from a fire hose, cascaded over the top of the car in front of me. Chris had taken to the air, circled and strafed around the car, spitting fire all the while. After circling around behind me, she tucked in tight and came crashing back down on the roof of the car in front of me.

“I told you she was after just me!” I shouted. “She isn't looking for a fight. You're just in her way.”

“My apologies, master. I forgot myself... Then the victory condition is your safety alone? Simple enough,” Chris said, no doubt with a smile.

Chris, with better control of her emotions, walked down the roof toward the mantis this time. Each foot fall from her talons causing the metal roof to shake. When Chris reached the halfway point, the mantis started walking as well to meet her, but when the closed in, the assassin once again attempted to use her speed to bolt past her. This time however, Chris held her wings wide open. The width she could cover while doing so, well exceeded that of the car and she was forced to come to a stop. When she turned her attention back onto Chris, her wings acted like two very large shields. The leathery membranes were like Kevlar and her arms were like titanium alloy, so long as they didn't take a direct blow at ninety degree angles, they parried the scythes aside.

The mantis was as fast as ever, but she still couldn't easily deliver a solid blow to Chris who was more than fluid enough in her movements. She also had the strength advantage, just like Rose before her. Every so often she managed to not only parry one of the assassin’s whirlwind attacks, but bat it aside and throw the mantis off her guard. That opened her up to a sweep and kick from her legs, the talons attached to the ends of each powerful enough to cleave through steel with ease. The same might be said of the chitinous scythes attached to her arms. Thus, the mantis could only duck and weave around Chris' occasional barrages of kicks.

Every time one of Chris' kicks went wide, and they collided with the car, the roof car itself was torn apart. The longer they fought, the

more scared their battle field became and the harder getting good footing got. Chris talons were not delicate or small by any means, so bridging the torn ribbons through the metal was no hard task, but for the petite human feet of the mantis, it was becoming a chore.

I believe there were subtle nuances in her stoic face that I was picking up. Now that I had watched her for a little while, I was sure the one I was looking at now was impatience and concern. She was on a tight schedule. That must mean that Rose would not be far behind. That wasn't necessarily a good thing though. It only spurred the girl onwards even more fiercely.

The more attacks she made, the more she invoked Murphy's Law. A situation like what happened last time was inevitable and by the time the thought crossed my mind, it was too late. One flurry of blows later, the assassin managed to slip one scythe past Chris's guard and into the very wing she was defending with. The curved tip met the leather-like membrane and passed through it from tip to the base near her wrist. There was a sick tearing sound and the vessels of blood coursing through those wings were let loose. It wasn't an artery, but blood dripped down from the wound regardless.

Chris roared and folded her wing. Her arm pinned the flat sides of blade against her side and arm so that the mantis could not free it. The two meter tall wyvern holding the flighty mantis two thirds her size. With her left wing, Chris swung her elbow in front of her and it connected with the side of the mantis' face with a crack. I thought her neck might snap with how her head turned after being struck like that, but it swung back into place, as though by instinct. Then the elbow came swinging back the other way and hit the other side of her face, cracking the neck in the other direction, much like before.

A third swing would not happen, as shaken as she was from being hit dead on by two such strikes, her free blade came swinging up and Chris was forced to block it or it would go straight for her throat. They were locked in combat, one blade pinned, the other keeping the other wing busy. Chris had the size and reach advantage, but what she didn't have, was the speed advantage. The assassin leapt off her feet and planted both of them on Chris' chin. There were powerful muscles in those legs that allowed her to jump like that, so even Chris' head was thrown back and pushed away despite her efforts to crane her neck back down. The mantis crouched down on her legs once again and kicked off Chris chin with all her might. There was a loud crack, and another slicing sound as the scythe was pulled free from Chris' pin and the girl was sent flying back across the roof of the car.

The melee broke off and each girl checked their wounds. Chris cracked her neck and rolled her shoulders, popping them like you'd crack knuckles. She also rotated her right wing and got a feel for it.

There was a sizable gash in the middle of her wing and it was bleeding a bit, but it didn't stop her from moving and extending it. On the other side, the mantis girl pressed her fingers against each cheek which looked red, raw and bruised. She seemed a little unsteady on her feet, no doubt from the brain inside her skull being rattled a bit, but she was still more than functional enough. But the antenna on the top of her head perked up and stood up tall. Her head went rigid and straight as well.

When I looked past her, I knew full well why. The train had left the open plains surrounding Anthren and back into the black forests dotting The Empire. Some of these trees grew a little too close to the tracks. Not that any tree could survive too close, but usually there were some branches hanging low enough... and usually there wasn't anyone standing so high above the ground and on top of the roofs of the train cars...

Even though she wasn't looking in the right direction, when the first branch came, she ducked out-of-the-way perfectly. She did it with no margin or error either, at the very last moment. The compound eyes on the sides of her head along with her antennae really did give her three hundred and sixty degree vision... Chris on the other hand... While I hit the deck and went to ground even more than I was already, she stood tall and didn't move at all. When the branch came... It broke upon her abdomen. Her talons were rooted in the roof, so she didn't even budge at all.

I think for a moment in time, shorter than a millisecond, the assassin and I shared the same expression on our faces.

Then Chris started walking forward again and I knew she really was beyond the realm of common sense. She plodded forward slower than before, digging her claws into the metal roof as she walked, but as the branches of various sizes came rushing toward her at nearly eighty kilometers an hour now, they broke upon her like waves on the beach. She was like a tank, a flying tank marching its way toward the assassin. Meanwhile, the mantis had to sidestep, duck and leap over every hurdle that came rushing in from behind her.

In this crazy situation, the advantage had swung far into Chris' favor. Not only did the mantis now have to dodge Chris' attacks, she also had to avoid every oncoming branch which could surely take out the smaller and lighter girl with ease. Her scythes easily snapped the branches in two like hedge cutters to a twig when she held them up to guard her body, but she hard virtually no opportunity to do so. The game had changed from a clash into a game of cat and mouse. Chris being the cat plodding unstoppable over the roof and the mantis being pushed further and further back across that roof. When a very large branch approached, all Chris had to do was lift a leg up and her talons

turned it into sawdust when it came into contract with her talons, for everything smaller, she paid no heed.

But on the full defensive, even Chris couldn't make contact. The wild swings and splinters showered in every which direction, but eventually a new variable was added to the game. As the train rolled around a corner, a wall approached. There was an arch cut into it, but it was only so high. It was also close, very close. The only thing I could do was lay myself as flat against the roof as I could and hold on as the sound of wind in a tight tunnel deafened my ears. The absolute darkness did not let up for twenty seconds and when the sun shone through the tree canopies once again I looked up and saw the mantis in the distance also clinging to the roof.

But there was no Chris.

The assassin rose to her feet and she fixed her eyes on me. That same steely indigo gaze, the gaze of a predator. I had grown no more used to it now than I was earlier today. Sweat coated my forehead and a cold chill took over the rest of my body. For the first time, I forced myself to be brave enough to stand tall, but my legs were shaky, unsteady on the rocking and rolling car below me as it bounced along the rails cutting through the forest floor.

I took a shaky step backward, but when I nearly fell over I had to stop. While I struggled, the assassin drew closer and closer. A glisten shone off her scythes as she quietly closed in on me, only one though running through her mind: Murder.

“Gavel.” A voice called from the distance over the sound of the rushing wind.

The mantis stopped. I stopped. Time seemed to stop and I'm sure the train would have of well if it could.

A shadow appeared on the roof of the car and it grew larger and larger. I looked up and so did the mantis.

“DROP!!!” The voice, Chris, boomed as she plummeted from the sky on knee forward.

Like a meteorite from the heavens, Chris came crashing down on top of the mantis. The insect girl’s keen senses that boarded on a sixth sense flung herself backward on instinct, but it wasn't only the point of impact that was in danger. The scaled knee of the wyvern hit the train with such force, I swear I could see the metal warp and bend, like a ripple that kicked up the metal. It traveled through the car as it struggled to absorb the force of the blow. It was like an explosion without fire, as though a concussive shock wave raked across the area. The mantis who had tried to land just out of her Chris' path, was thrown backward when the metal undulating like a wave catapulted her further down the train. Even I was knocked off my feet and I fell back down on top of the train, hard, desperate just to hold on so that I wasn't

thrown clear off.

I was surprised the car itself wasn't smashed to pieces, but the undercarriage held steady and after rocking worryingly a few times, the car in front and behind it kept it in line. We were either lucky, or Chris had a better grasp of what she was doing than I was giving her credit for... I'm pretty sure it's not the latter. She could have not shouted out her attack names beforehand for once, for starters.

The roof of the car was completely imploded though and Chris stood back up, having to pull her knee free from the twisted metal with a bit of effort. She stood in a newly fashioned shallow crater, the mantis with an arm blade embedded into the edge of it that was not the end of the car and myself, hanging on for dear life at the other end which also formed the edge of the crater.

“My my. How rude of me.” Chris said wistfully. “I didn't intend to let myself go like that while still not in my final form. You'll have to forgive me.”

That mantis did not reply. Instead, I saw her abdomen twitch.

“Chris... You're not the only one with a final for-”

Like a rocket the mantis counter-attacked. She leaped straight at Chris in her crater, blades forward, crossed like a pair of scissors. The wyvern prepared herself, but I sensed something very wrong. I still felt that steely gaze at the same intensity as before...

As the mantis approached at full speed, she kicked off the train far a second time and committed to her spear tackle at Chris' head. With both blades together, even Chris was forced to save her head by ducking, but then I heard a very loud buzz. The direction of the charge changed, the speed increased. The angle changed slightly upward, over Chris's head. The mantis' own four wings flashed out and their beats per second made them a blur. The inevitable collision course, was with my own neck.

I had nowhere to run. No time to do so if I could.

But there was a sound louder than the insectoid wings, it wasn't a buzz, it was a crack, like a whip. As the mantis passed over Chris' head and was heading straight toward me something else green flashed. It was long, thick, and like a whip. Chris long dragon's tail curled upward like a scorpion’s tail and swatted the mantis away with one swish. I watched as the lightweight was sent flying backward, up and over the edge of the crater and not just past the car, but the next car and the one after that. I'm sure she would have flown further, but even as she tumbled through the air, her wings buzzed and as she rotated in mid-air like a tumbling log down a river, she stabilized, but her landing was not perfect. She hit the roof of the car two down and rolled over a few times before springing back to her feet, stunned.

“Go now, master! Tamerlion must ride! I will hold the

assassin at bay!”

Pushing off the roof with her powerful legs, she took flight and threw herself toward the mantis still recovering in the distance.

My path was once again clear. I picked myself off the ground and fought against the motions of the train and the harsh winds blowing past me and ran to the edge of the car and dropped down onto the couplings. They too were locked, but while Chris and the assassin battled above, I broke through the cars and scurried away beneath them. When I ran through the second car I could fear the sound of battle above me, but I pressed onward.

I ran through and over about a dozen more cars, but each one was still protected. When I reached the thirteenth, the irony was not lost on me, a linchpin with a thin iron ring and a lever beside it.

“That's why you don't murder the maintenance guys. Just like I thought: They weren't completely finished.” I said excitedly to myself.

I rushed over and wrapped my right hand over the handle of the pin and I cradled that hand in my left and began to pull with all my might. It felt as though it was rusty, but I refused to relent. I thought I'd pull my arm out of my socket before the pin would come sliding out from between the couplings, but eventually it came sliding out with a ringing like a struck tuning fork. I tossed it aside and off the tracks and next threw myself at the lever. If the pin had been a little rusty, then the lever was completely corroded in comparison. But once again, I refused to give up and I would break myself if I had to. If it sent half of this train rolling backward with the assassin on it, then it was worth it to me.

While I was reaming on the lever, I spotted through the woods, that were beginning to thin, another turn in the tracks. It curved into an old bridge and across the ravine. There were hills beyond the bridge and mountains further in the distance. The track seemed to build up in a ten percent gradient after crossing the ravine. A lucky break. If there was ever any time to decouple the train, it was very soon. Half the train would roll back down with ease.

But soon I could hardly get a grip on the lever at all. My hands were drenched with sweat and the tighter I tried to grip, the more easily my hands slipped off. A very cold sweat.

A cold sweat.

For once I felt the pain quicker than everything else. My body was sent flying through the door next to me and I tumbled down the isle through a passenger car. I think I might have cracked a rib due to that one. My arms hardly had the strength to hold myself up. I pushed up with my legs and pushed against the walls to get myself steady on my feet again. As steady as I could all things considered.

At the broken door, at the far end of the car, a familiar silhouette had appeared.

“You've got to be... fucking kidding me...” I spat.

She took one step in and the another. Her wings seemed a mess behind her, struggling to fold back properly. She was far worse for wear than before, but she was still walking and walking tall toward me. Her scythes at the ready, her indigo eyes were furrowed, furious, but the rest of her face still showed no emotion at all.

I felt helpless. No matter how fast I ran, no matter what help I got, she was relentless. She would not, could not, be stopped. The door behind me... was locked. When I turned my back to run, she'd leap and be on me. There was no way I would get past that door. I was tired, very tired. My adrenaline had been sapped completely and when my body finally realized that, my knees gave out and I slumped back down onto the ground. I did my best to try pushing with my legs to get away, but it was a fraction of the speed that the mantis was approaching me with.

I couldn't see another figure enter through the broken door behind her and as she got closer the helpfulness of anyone appearing reached zero. She was almost within striking distance now. I was near closing my eyes and be done with it, but a crack behind me caused my eyes to shoot wide open.

Another door was thrown off its hinges and it flew over my head and into the assassin. The wood was cleaved easily in two, but another crack ripped through the air above my head and an invisible force collided with the girl and threw her back down the isle. She couldn't cut what wasn't there and when I heard the jingle of a chain, I had a good idea what had just happened.

“Laven? Are you unscathed?” Susan asked as she stepped through the broken door.

As Susan entered the Assassin rose to her feet and analyzed the new threat. Perhaps the deathly stare from the mantis threw the priestess off. She wasn't someone built for combat like the other two were, she was more like me in that regard. When I finally looked, the golden staff in her paws and the scales on top of it was rising and falling between the two sides like crazy. The Anubis, a divine judge was covering her mouth with her free paw and the eyes peering over it were wide.

I think I've gotten a little used to fear, but that's not what those eyes were telling me. Susan was bewildered as she gazed upon the predator like gaze of the mantis girl. She wasn't terrified or even defiant. She was alarmed. Deeply disturbed.

While Shoshanah was stunned, I feared the mantis would strike, but a rumble shook the car and smashing through the wooden

roof was Chris who landed in front of me, forcing the assassin to leap backward. She was breathing heavily, with a few more cuts than before, but she was still battle-ready. While our pursuer backed up and her eyes switched back and forth between the three of us, analyzing us, I heard a roaring approach from beyond. Moseying through the broken doorway, was Rose. She was breathing heavily, but she was still burning bright, even if her sword had been doused. There were a number of more cuts on her than I remember leaving her with, but she was still steady on her feet. She was however, looking very cross.

“No more running!” Rose growled. "I really shouldn't have blown the roof off like that...." She bemoaned.

“Surrender now, or prepare to fight us all!” Chris commanded. "You are outnumbered. Yield now and you shall be spared!"

The mantis girl looked one way and then the other, one of her antenna, I just noticed, looked broken and unnaturally bent. But the other one was still twitching quite feverishly Her eyes also shot around the cabin as Rose approached from behind and Chris from the front. The assassin cast her eyes downward, but not dejected. Her gaze seemed focused on something. A nagging thought was in the back of my head, but it was stuck on something and refused to come out properly.

I watched as the girl then knelt on the floor, as though praying by the bedside. A praying mantis? How quaint, I thought, at first. But she was not surrendering or seeking a miracle. She lifted her arms, blades extended, above her head. She then turned those blades inward and pointed the curved tips toward the floor. Rose and Chris both stopped, unsure of what to make of the girl, but when I heard the sound of the train on the tracks change, my body shook with realization.

And in terror.

“Stop her!” I tried to shout out.

But it was too late. The assassin brought down her blades. They pieced right through the wooden floor of the car like knives through warm butter.

I could see it all unfolding in my head. At the very center of the car, her blades plunged down. Right through. Through the wheelbase made of simple wood. A shoddily designed and built train car. They were all very much alike, but all very different. As though they were from different places and made by different people. The only thing that united them was the ability to join together and keep the tracks.

There were five people inside the car, all near the middle. The wheelbase was severed in two and the supporting beam holding the undercarriage together... dropped. Two halves dropped into the tracks

below. The two halves of the wheelbase snagging on the wooden ties holding the of the bridge together. The whole undercarriage of the car was town out from underneath it and the bridge itself likewise twisted and ripped apart.

The two halves of the car broke inward and tried to clap together. The couplings attached to the car behind and ahead were wretched upward and the wheels on the three cars were dislodged from the rails.

We were now at the center of a train derailing.

At the speed we were going, the train began to tear itself apart, but it didn't have anywhere to go. The bridge couldn't contain it and as the train began to twist, turn and flip, it ripped apart the wooden trusses of the bridge. The wooden car tripped apart and I felt like I was thrown from the wreckage mid crash like a boulder from a catapult. Gravity soon took over and I watched as I was falling back first with a front row seat at the chaos above me.

Broken, cracked and splintered wood was flying in each direction. Hunks of iron scattered like pellets from a shotgun. A terrible rending sound of both deafened me until my sense of hearing was overwhelmed with shell-shock. The only thing I could hear was my own heart beat.

I dared not even try to look down, I wasn't sure how far down the drop was, or what was below. Instead I watched the scene unfold above me, helpless. I watched all my hard work and the culmination of my hopes and dreams tear apart. But through all of that, I saw one flash of green steer its way through the chaos. One, two giant wings and single wyvern tucked in and shot at me like a spear, a diving falcon after climbing above ensuring wreckage.

Chris hit me hard, but much softer than any of the flying debris would. She wrapped her wings around me as she plummeted. I believe she had to. As she pulled me into her bosom, her wings forming a shield, a barrage of debris pelted us.... her. There was no way she'd be able to fly like that, but in the end, that wasn't an option.

The two of us fell back toward the earth. Through the air and into the trees below. Chris maneuvered so that her back now faced the ground and I even I could feel the crack of branch after branch break upon her back. The sound and feeling of each crack intensified, it happened so often, or speed slowed considerable until there was one final thud. It had to be the ground and the impact, as indirect as it was for me, knocked me out cold as my poor brain rattled around inside my skull.

Darkness, my old friend, returned to me again.

Chapter 59

I felt my vision slowly flicker back to life as my body began to spring back to wakefulness. When my memory followed shortly after, I was fully awake on the spot. A rush of all my other senses clashed with the imagined klaxon ringing inside my head. We had hit rock bottom, seafloor, after our emergency dive and the engines were only just coming back online. It was less of a 'hit' and more of a crash.

Although I was awake, I found I still couldn't move. There was a force holding me down. It wasn't crushing me like it wasn't a piece of debris, holding onto me and pulling me down. It was soft and warm.

“Master? Are you okay?” A voice right next to my ear asked.

I had to pull back in order to get a better look: it was Chris. I was lying down on top of her, her breasts jiggling slightly after my head let them spring back into shape after using them as a pillow. I propped myself up with one hand on her left shoulder and the other by her right 'ear'. There was a trail of blood seeping from her forehead, one eye shut and her face nicked from a thousand tiny cuts. Her left wing was still wrapped around my back, but her grip was weak. Her right wing lay sprawled out on the forest floor.

“Thank...Goodness...” She said weakly with a smile.

I looked around and all around there was devastation. Iron rails driven like nails into the dirt, shattered barrels and crates, their contents spilled everywhere and ruined train cars and the remnants of the bridge. Besides the sound of groaning and snapping rubble I heard the rush of a stream nearby to my right. It was the last flow of water in this deep ravine that looked like it had been dredged by a glacier long ago. I could barely see it through the trees, it didn't look much more than a creek, but I saw it was also littered with rubble. The smallest parts were washing away with the current.

When I looked up, I saw a path of destroyed branches which had been snapped as we were in free fall. The bridge was now in two halves with a third of it missing; what had been torn apart had been pulled down into the ravine. Sitting precariously above was part of the rear half of the train that came to a grinding halt before plunging off the edge. One car in particular was rocking back and forth over the precipice.

It wasn't safe to be laying here. The rest of the train could come rolling down.

“Come on,” I pleaded with Chris. “We can't stay here. The rest of the train could-”

When I stood up and tried to pull Chris up with me, I didn't stop because of her dead weight, I stopped because she winced in pain. She teeth grit tight and she seethed in agony despite her best efforts

not to do so. There was only one part of her body that wasn't moving and that was her right wing that was resting idle on the ground.

"Chris? Did you-"

"No. I am in perfect condit- ow ow ow!"

She tried to deny it, but when I tried to lift her up by her left shoulder, and her right wing was jostled, she winced in pain again.

"When we were falling, you hit the ground first... Did you land on your right wing?"

Chris looked away from me and couldn't look me in the eye, but she eventually nodded with a sad expression on her face.

"Well... Then it's my fault..." I apologized.

"No! Master it's-"

"Sorry, but this is going to be my fault too."

I put my back and knees into lifting Chris off the ground. This time I didn't stop no matter how hurt she looked. Chris' body shook in pain, but she stood as steady on her feet as she could. Her tail violently whipped back and forth behind her, smashing any debris it came into contract with. It was as though it were a coping method for the pain. I let her use me as a crutch and I led her away from our impact crater. Her right wing hung low and dragged across the floor the whole time, but there wasn't anything I could for that right now. Not with thousands of tons waiting to rain down on top of us at any moment.

We navigated our way through the graveyard of wreckage. Twisting and turning our way through the debris until we reached the point where the cliff became too steep to climb. It was behind where the bridge had snapped and far enough off to the side that we wouldn't have to worry about it collapsing down on top of us if... when it did. I laid Chris to rest against a tree while she tried to hold her one wing with her other. Without fingers, let alone another hand, she couldn't hold on and it flapped back down at her side. There was no way I could leave her like that. The pain is one thing, but if her arm was messed up like that. It had to be treated, immediately. I reached for ties that held the two halves of my leather jerkin together and undid them. Then I slipped out of it, allowing the jerkin to drift off my shoulders and onto the ground.

Chris looked up to watch me and her face turned red while she stuttered, "L-laven? Master? T-this i-is hardly t-the time for-"

I grabbed the hem of my white long sleeve shirt underneath, rolled it up and then pulled it over my head. While I did so, I think I heard Chris squeak and she was now covering her face with her good wing. I gulped down hard and then pressed forward, ignoring her fidgeting.

With my shirt wrapped around my left hand, I grabbed hold of

her left wing and gently pulled it away from her face. She didn't put up much of a resistance, instead she looked away as I knelt down in front of her. I reached out with my right hand and felt the smooth skin her collarbone. I traced my fingers along it, the merest touch could have been mistaken for a live electrical wire if you were just watching Chris. I took a few deep breaths and tried to ignore the wyvern whose pink flesh was turning beet red by the second.

My fingers moved up to the base of her neck and I felt the pulse beat rapidly. I held my finger there and counted to ten, taking note of the beats per minute. When I pulled back I saw Chris' face had turned back and up, her eyes shut with her face scrunched up. I let loose a long sigh as I looked down at my left hand while I was rolling out the bundled up shirt.

A plain white shirt with long sleeves and mechanical stitches. I thumbed up the tag at the back of the collar and pang in my own heart felt like an icy hand had seized it. I read what was written there. Very slowly, soaking in every word.

M
100% COTTON PRESHRUNK
MADE IN U.S.A

A cheap warehouse store no name brand. The familiar alphabet and typecast letters forming words I could read and understand. My memories may be jumbled, but this was one of the few things I had to remind myself that I wasn't crazy. I was an alien in a strange new world. That's how it has been all this time. An artifact of my home. One of the few things I could salvage from my box of concrete when I woke up for the first time. No, it wasn't the first time. There was something before then, but I couldn't remember it. Long term memories, short term memories. Personal memories. Just a gut feeling, some images of that place. Concrete jungles. Automobiles and planes. Laws of the natural world on the pages of textbooks. The plots of famous books and plays, their characters real, historical or fantastical and made up. Thinking about it made my head heart and my train of thought snag and fumble. I stilled my breathing and grabbed hold of the shirt and then after steeling myself, I tore fabric.

The ripping of cotton caused Chris to jump and she opened her eyes to see me yanking on the cotton and tearing the shirt apart into one large sheet.

“Master?” She said meekly.

I swallowed down complicated emotions as I tore the shirt apart and when I was finished I quickly folded it into the shape of a triangle.

“Let me see your wing, Chris.” I said as I knelt back down in front of her.

It was only polite of me to ask, but I still reached out on my own

since she didn't seem to have the ability to move it on her own. She winced when I lifted it up and she grit her teeth when I massaged my thumbs over the skin of her bicep toward the scales that covered her forearm below the elbow. The scales were hard as bone, but I could still push them down since there were still muscles underneath no matter firm and taut they were. I searched for a place that was soft enough on the underside to feel her pulse. I counted to ten and made a mental note of the beat per minute.

"Lower than the norm," I said. "Definitely a fracture. Just like I thought."

"Laven? How are you sure?"

I squeezed my hands tight around her forearm almost as hard as I could and I could hear the crunch underneath. Chris' eyes went wide and she shook violently, fighting back tears.

"Sorry, but I'm going to have to reset it. It's going to hurt, a lot... But we can't leave your wing like this. If it heals wrong..."

She looked away for just a second, but when she looked up, she showed me her brave face and said with her deep husky heroic way of speaking, "Of course. I trust you completely, master!"

When I wrapped both my hands around the site where I'm sure the crunch came from, I squeezed tight and move my hands in opposite directions. I heard the crunch again and Chris let out a short wail that was the complete opposite of the voice she put on a brave face for just a moment ago. I carefully did the closed reduction until I felt the bone underneath all those scales was securely back in place. Some proper healing from Susan would finish it off. The discomfort, pressure swelling and the chance it heals wrong should be alleviated if not gone now.

With her fracture fixed, I took the shirt and held it up against Chris' chest. One corner on the shoulder, the other under her wing: wrap it around and back up toward the other shoulder. Tie the two ends around the neck-

As I leaned in to tie the knot at the back of her neck, I was a little too dense in realizing that my face was very close to her own. If I turned my face a little to the right, our lips would probably touch. My hands stopped mid loop after I realized I accidentally got my finger stuck in the knot.

"Oops, sorr-"

Chris slowly closed her eyes and then gently let her head slump to the side. Our temples touched gently and she snuggled by rubbing her head with mine. I could feel one of her horns rustled the hair on the top of my head as she did and most of my vision was blocked by her reptilian ear fin. I felt myself blushing now as I reached with both my hands behind her neck as I struggled with the knot. I

shouldn't be, it was a really simple knot. Not being able to see it isn't an excuse.

Chris' good wing wrapped around my back and held me tighter, so that my chin now rested on her shoulder and her head rested on mine. At least I could see the knot now... But no, this was definitely an embrace. This doesn't happen by accident.

“C-chris?”

“Thank you, Laven.”

“Huh?”

“This meant a lot to you. Didn't it?”

“What? The shirt? No, it's just-”

“Shh,” She gently shushed motherly. “It's okay... Besides!” She just as suddenly switched back to her heroic voice, “I'll get it back ta' you soon.”

“No. Don't worry about it. Really. I can't wear it anymore anyways...”

I felt her grip lessen on my enough so that I could pull back, and with the knot fixed, and my finger free, I did just that. I observed Chris' face. Her 'ears' drooped down and with a brave grin she showed just for me. Her eyes closed shut while her cheeks flushed red.

“Then I'll graciously accept the 'cape' of Sir Tamerlion,” She said while rocking her wing now folded and supported by the sling.

I couldn't help but smile back.

But when the bushes nearby rustled a shiver went up my spine. I had been so focused on performing first aid, that I forgot where we were and our circumstances. My head must have been shaken up more than I thought. Chris was down one arm, and I stood no chance against the mantis if she reappeared. I had no idea what had happened to the other girls too. I had just been assuming they would be alright, but the bridge was over fifty meters up...

Wet footsteps plodded through the bush and something that I could have mistaken for Sadako come out from behind it. Long wet black hair draped over her face with water pooling underneath her wherever she went. She was far from ghostly pale though; her skin was a bronze tan and patches of wet black fur dripped from the ends of her arms and legs... Then the smell of wet dog hit me like a burlap sack of bricks.

“Susan?” I said reaching out to her. “Are you-”

“Not. A. Word,” She said

Then she leaned over on all four paws and she shook her head, butt and tail furiously. Droplets of water sprayed everywhere and continued to do so when she stood back up, kicked her legs out and waving her arms around.

Her hair was still quite wet, the glistening gold of her jewelry

only accentuating that wet dog appearance when she threatened again, “Not. A. Word.”

I felt a huge sense of relief and my shoulders visibly sagged down as low as they could go. Shoshanah was fine.

“I'm just glad you're alright,” I said.

She had noticed me still standing and understood I was alright at a glance. She looked relieved I wasn't going to teased for her appearance or smell too, so she smiled back at me. That smile didn't last long when she saw the state Chris was is.

“What transpired here?”

“Chris broke my fall from above... But she landed on her arm in the process. Her wing is fractured.”

“Sorry, but justice won’t have wings today.” Chris said solemnly.

Then her eyes cast downward at my chest, mostly still covered in bandages, but she looked me up and down with a slightly dubious expression on her face. I looked at her, then back to Chris and then to her again. Her gaze followed mine and her dubious expression became suspicions, almost accusing.

“A sling! For a sling!” I blustered turning red in the face.

Susan's eyes shot wide when she finally realized it, “But Laven... That garment... It's from-”

“That doesn't matter right now. We got bigger things to worry about. We haven't seen Rose, have you?”

She shook her head.

“The assassin?”

She shook her head again.

“Neither have we... We should try to see if we can heal Chris' wing. It would be easier than trying to climb out of here. I don't think that mantis will wait long to-”

“LOOK OUT!” A voice cried out from the bushes.

I didn't even get a chance to turn my head toward the sound. I was hit by something not unlike a truck. It hit me at the waist, lifted me off my feet and we both tumbled and hit the ground a few meters away. I didn't even know what was going on, but I felt a boiling heat next to my face. A raging fire just above my nose which was filled with the scent of burning cedar. A fire attached to a scaly armored tail and crouched over my body was the back, and full, bottom half of black two piece swimsuit. When I finally managed to look beyond that, there was someone else crouched down where I was just a moment ago. Two long scythes planted up to her wrists in the soil.

“Oh no.” I said weakly.

With a metallic ringing sound, the intruder pulled her blades from the earth and stood tall once again, facing off against the girl

sitting on top of me.

"Laven! Run!" Rose yelled as she leapt off me and changed the mantis.

The assassin was still analyzing her new surrounds and gauging the threats and her target, so Rose's ferocity forced the mantis into a melee and a struggle as their blades clashed, rang and scraped against one another.

"Lady Rose!" Chris bellowed as she rose to her feet and charged headlong into the mantis.

Without her right wing to fly, she could only plod along at running speed, so the mantis had more than enough time to sense her coming. That part would have been easy anyways, she has three hundred and sixty degree vision and can probably smell and sense the disturbances in the air even though one functional antenna twitching on the top of her head. She moved her blades to deflect Rose's sword down toward the floor, but she wasn't worried about opening her up to a counter-attack. She pushed off the ground with ease and flipped backward into the air out of the path of Chris who was charging forward and past where she had been like a bull.

Rose and Chris then joined forces and assaulted the mantis together. Chris throwing herself headlong into the enemy and doing her best to deflect those deadly blades with her good wing. However, with one vulnerable arm, she was forced to be more on her guard with only one good shield and an obvious weakness. Rose was panting hard, but she followed up on every spearhead that Chris launched at the mantis, driving her further and further back. She circled behind the wyvern and attacked before dropping back to cut off any escape or slipping past both their guards.

"Laven," Susan said calmly, placing her paw on my shoulder as I still lay there on the ground. "We cannot hesitate."

"But-" I tried to protest.

"Do not insult their efforts. Our foremost course of action is to withdraw and regroup."

While the three of them clashed I let Susan help pull me up and then the two of us ran further into the wilderness, dodging the piles of debris as we fled as fast as we were able to. We leapt over twisted metal and sharp broken food and fallen trees until the sound of battle faded behind us.

I turned to face Susan in mid run, "We can't keep running forever. She wont rest. She wont stop."

"Neither do we three have a means to stop her."

Three?

"You mean all four of us?"

"No, Laven. I am positive there exists only two individuals

capable of stopping her. He who sent her-"

"-And her target?"

Susan stopped running very suddenly. It threw me off, but I also skid to a halt. I turned to face her with my face no doubt as full of anxiety as my breaths were tired and my body aching. She was calm, very calm. My impression of her right now was that she too must have hit her head on the way down. This wasn't a time for that kind of 'devil may care' tranquility that was etched and frozen on her face.

"No... You." She said matter-of-factually.

I grabbed hold of her paw and tried to pull her onward again.

"Come on, there's no time. We need to get-"

"Laven. You would not be so quick to flee if you had seen but just a fraction of what I have seen."

For as hard as I was pulling, it was far from enough to drag the Anubis from where she stood. She glared back at me with her red eyes, looking past the expression on my face. I let go of my grip and her paw fell back down by her side.

"I've come close to death more times in the past couple of hours than I have in weeks. All of those attempts were caused by one person. She's not someone Rose or Chris can pin down. I think that's more than reason enough for me to keep running."

Susan shook her head, "Incorrect."

"And what makes you think that?" I demanded, getting irritated.

"...Because I know you."

"Do you now?"

"I've seen you."

I was nearly spitting my words out now, "This isn't the time to be cryp-"

She raised her paw, with one clawed digit extended and held it up against my chest. Up against my left breast, where my heart was.

"I've witnessed YOU." She stressed. "Beyond the beast. Behind the flesh."

She traced her claw in a circle around my heart as she spoke and I swallowed my growing anger that was being fed by my panic.

"I am privy to witnessing a great many things that mortals cannot perceive, or begin imagine. I am a judge. I weigh the hearts and sins of living things... But never before have I been pained by seeing them. I've had to see the ugliest of hearts, but not until today have I bore witness to one as twisted as I have today."

The look on Susan's face when she gazed upon the mantis for the first time returned to me. The confused and panicked expression on her face when Rose had sensed imminent danger back at the station also came back to me. Her face was a complete one eighty

from then. She seemed in control. She seemed to have a plan. But I had a hard time believing it.

"You're talking about our friendly neighborhood assassin? A professional murderer is as close to ugly and sinful as you're going to get."

Susan shook her head slowly, "Not that kind of twisted. Unnatural. Tortured." She said trailing off.

She looked back up, into my eyes.

"You are the only one here with the power to stop her. To end 'it'."

"End what?"

"End-" Susan's eyes went wide as she looked away from me and over my shoulder, "Pharaoh!"

Susan leapt toward me. One of her paws grabbed hold of my hand and pulled me into herself It happened all so very fast, as she spun me around on the spot. I didn't even have time to flinch nor resist. When I found myself facing the opposite direction, I saw a familiar stare. Indigo colored eyes. Bearing down on me. Behind them a brilliant rainbow of colors and while everything moved slow as time came to a crawl, I saw and heard each individual beat as that rainbow buzzed. I felt Susan's body pressed tightly against my own. As though I were pinned to her. I also felt a sharp prick against my chest, over my left breast.

I heard Susan howl out in pain and I watched as a golden light washed over the rainbow. There was a crack, an explosion of light that erupted behind Susan's back. The indigo colored eyes went flying backward, wide with surprise. The wings attached to them were not able to stop their backward momentum and the silhouette of the assassin crashed into a nearby tree and nearly cracked it in two.

My chest felt wet. Very wet. When I pushed Susan away and look down I realized we didn't just feel pinned together. For a brief moment, we literally were. There was a wound in her right shoulder, a gash in her back and another one coming out the other side. It was bleeding profusely, but there was also a cut in my own chest, but only about a couple of centimeters deep and it was very small in comparison.

Strength left Susan's knees and I was dragged down with her when she dropped. I held her up the best I could, but all I could do was stop her from hitting the ground and hold her body up as she sat on the ground.

I screamed bloody murder, "Shoshanah! Susan!"

"Be... At ease... Laven." She spoke, visibly pained. "Do not think me so incompetent, that I would risk my vital organs to serve as your shield, such that I did."

I had my arms wrapped under hers to hold her up, but I kept my hands over her wounds and tried to press on them as tight as I could to stop the bleeding. With her other arm, she gently placed her paw over my hand that was on her chest and squeezed it tight. A green glow shone from the tattoos on her stomach and shrouded her paw. The bleeding stopped, but the wounds were still not closed. The light faded away before it could heal all the way.

That wasn't right.

"Hey! Come on!" I shouted and shook her lightly.

She closed her eyes instead and went limp. Her body was still warm, she was breathing shallowly, but she slipped away and I was holding all her weight up by myself.

My breathing became erratic. I couldn't control my blinking as my eyes stung like cut onions were being ground into them. My lips twitched and my throat became parched instantly. I turned my gaze at the girl on the other side of a small clearing in the trees. She too was shaky on her feet, but she forced herself back up. It was like watching a puppet on strings. It was almost unnatural to watch.

Unnatural

She leveled her gaze not on me, but on Susan who I was still holding. Those steely indigo eyes and the black bags underneath them. One antenna atop her head, broken, still and at an odd angle compared to the one swiveling around like a radar dish. The wings sticking out of her abdomen flickered and buzzed, but they also seemed bent, unable to fold back in properly. Every time she tried, they got stuck and she was forced to flex them out again, but never the in the same arrangement.

Tortured

The mantis was soon steady on her feet. After she had recovered she marched forward yet again. I looked down at the Anubis in my arms, wounded, unconscious. I looked behind me and saw nothing, heard nothing. I looked up and then down. I slowed down my breathing. I furrowed my brow and grit my teeth.

I laid Susan on the ground, stood up and stepped over her. I was shaking at first, every muscle in my body was trying to make me run, but I walked. Every synapse in my brain was telling me to turn around, but I didn't. Reason told me what I was doing was wrong. Stupid, wrong and foolish. I stopped paying attention.

I marched forward.

"Hey! You!" I shouted at the assassin.

Her eyes pried away from Susan and fixed on me, she didn't stop walking.

"Yeah. You!"

As I approached, the girl didn't seem the least bit worried. She

didn't seem the least bit anything. Her face was as stoic and steely as it always was.

“I'm the one you're after, right? Well? Come on! I'm right here!”

It was as dead as always was.

So there was only one person who could stop her, Right? Susan? Very well then.

One scythe snicked into position and I stopped to stand my ground. She was only a few steps away from now. I noticed for the first time in a long time, just how short she was. She wasn't any taller than Rose. The top of her head, ignoring her antenna, didn't reach over my shoulder.

She didn't march the last few steps. The mantis leapt at me. Her right hand grabbed hold of the bandages on the left side of my chest and her left arm with the blade drew back.

As time slowed down again, my ears picked up very odd sound.

“...Gotcha.” Susan must have said behind me.

The assassin’s blade rushed forward, directly for my face. But a golden light shone from my chest and an orb of light formed. It trapped the girl's right hand inside one half and what must be my heart within my chest in the other half. I squinted in the light and so did the girl. That did not stop her blade though, it was still thrusting through the air toward me with nothing to get in its way. But I felt myself approach it faster. When the blade was only a few centimeters from my face, my vision warped and I felt an uneasy feeling. For all the bravery I mustered before, I felt panic return. This wasn't the kind of sensation I had prepared myself for. I felt as though I was being pulled forward by some vacuum. My vision shot forward and my senses flew past the blade nearing my face into the eyes of the mantis.

When I hit them, I went beyond them and into the dark.

Chapter 60

Her breathing was ragged as she weaved through the forest and the fuel to stoke her flames was running low, yet she understood just how dire the situation was. She could not allow herself to stop. It is one thing to have finally tuned instincts to protect yourself, but it was another thing altogether to pin down a warrior quicker than you when she was hellbent on being somewhere else.

Her shortcomings the one thing she prided herself, her martial prowess, had failed her today. There was something she was missing, something that would have remedied all their problems. But she couldn't figure it out. She wasn't good at finding answers like that. She'd ask him, he'd know, or at least tell her a clever but kind lie. He'd wear an annoyed expression, but he'd smile as he shared his wisdom. That's just the man he was. But she was very close to losing all that and it gripped her heart in fear. Something she was not used to feeling and she wanted to get rid of that feeling immediately. So the salamander chastised herself as she ran, but any serious self-reflection would have to wait. She had to make him safe.

The tall girl, who ran slower, had the same thoughts consuming her. Perhaps had she been only less careless, she would still be able to fly. If she could still fly she could have whisked her master from this place; she could have taken him somewhere out of his assassin's reach. She had sworn to her sister that she would defend him at all costs. Her pride not only as a dragoon, knight and warrior of justice was on the line, but her word of honor as well. But those complicated oaths and words of honor spoken in secret to her sister was not the only thing that spurred her onward.

As she struggled to keep up with a broken wing slung snugly to her breast, there was something stirring beneath that breast. It wasn't pounding because of how fast she was running. She was afraid. It was an emotion she was also not used to. Battle did not cause her to flinch, neither did death, but fear still seized her. It was a fear of loss. The only thing she cherished was the bond with her sister and she would do whatever she asked of her and more. She wanted nothing else. She had nothing else. So her head was confounded why she felt like she was losing something. She should be afraid of failure instead. Why was she worrying that her world was feeling smaller by the second? The skies did not limit her, so why did she feel as though she was falling? Understanding that feeling would have to wait. She had to make him safe.

Rose vaulted over one last ledge and came at last to a clearing with a population of three. Her eyes immediately fixated on the man present, the one known as Laven, the man she was so worried about

and the blade pressing up against his philtrum. Her instincts kicked in, she let loose a mighty battle cry and stormed down into the clearing. Her sword she held high and her tail which had been sputtering a moment ago exploded to life.

"Halt!" A voice thundered.

In a rare moment of clarity, Rose actually did stop. She skidded to a stop only two meters from the three bodies gathered in the clearing. Her eyes pried away from Laven and to the girl kneeling on the ground behind the other two. Two black ears with white tufts of fur sticking out and adorned in glittering gold and holding tightly with two black furry paw-like hands which were around a gold staff with a scale balancing on top of it. An Anubis; when she looked up and locked her red eyes with the salamander, she couldn't be mistaken for anyone else other than Shoshanah.

Rose listened and stopped, but her eyes quickly jumped back to the other two. On the left was the mantis. She looked far worse for wear and her eyes were actually closed; as if she were sleeping. But she also had one hand grabbing onto Laven's chest and the scythe on her other arm was in position to skewer through his head instantaneously. A pale golden light, a halo, surrounded them both and a dull light glowed where the assassin's hand met with Laven's chest.

"What in the hells is this?" She demanded to know.

Chris came over the ledge second, the screaming and yelling alarmed her, but it also made her take a step back and hesitate unlike Rose as she quickly took in the scene. Then and only then, did Susan bother to explain.

"The assassin is longer a concern of ours."

Rose took a step forward, still ready to strike.

"What?" She said incredulously.

"How the day ends is now for Laven to decide."

Susan noticed Rose still hadn't stood down, but Chris had caught up and stood beside her, placing her wing on her shoulder to hold her back. She then closed her eyes once again.

"We failed to restrain her and she frustrated our efforts to defeat her. Her quarry has been Laven, so in the end, it will be he who is master of his fate."

"Enough riddles!" Rose shouted, growing impatient by the second.

"I have erected a spell between them. Laven will convince her directly to spare his life. I have the utmost confidence he will not fail. Until then, we must not disturb their bodies. I am ashamed to say my powers are weak at the present time..."

Two huge gashes from being pierced by the assassin's scythe were still gaping. They had ceased bleeding, but they were still painful

open wounds. The other two girls understood when they noticed it.

"I would wish to pry back the blade as well, just as much as you I wish to restrain her, but it is taking every ounce of my power to keep my spell in place and her asleep. I lack the energy to heal this wound of mine properly. Disturbing her corporeal form... could jostle her to wakefulness."

"Then what are we supposed to do?" Rose shouted, still not backing down and struggling against Chris' grip.

"Believe in him."

Susan had said it without hesitation and those words stopped Rose in her tracks. She relaxed and Chris easily pulled her back. They both cast their eyes downward.

"He is most likely confused and lost right now. I must go to him, although with so little power, I do not know what I can do. Regardless, please wait for us."

And thus, the Anubis went silent and her head tilt down as her body rested. Neither Chris nor Rose understood exactly what was going on, but when both were told to believe in Laven, they did exactly that. It was against their natures, but if running amok would put him in danger, they would restrain themselves. Rose sat down on the spot and didn't look away from Laven's sleeping face for a moment and Chris stood guard over him, never averting her gaze.

***

I thought I had gone unconscious, but I seem to recall experiencing at least a few minutes of free fall through the darkness. An odd type of darkness at that. I could still see myself clearly, but there was no source of light and nothing had any depth. It was as if there was no third dimension at all. I felt like I had stumbled... fallen... into a dark flatland.

Maybe falling wasn't the right word? Falling would imply I was heading in one direction. A few minutes of falling from anywhere should have taken me to my final destination by now: the ground. Instead, I was floating around in limbo. At the very least my ability to think was coming back. I had spent the first couple of minutes screaming until my throat went hoarse.

Pondering imponderables couldn't last forever though. It happened all at once, my feet suddenly hit something solid, the knees buckled and I fell over face first into the invisible floor. It was impossible to tell how fast I had been falling, if I had been falling at all, because there wasn't anything to gauge my speed with, but I didn't hear anything snap on impact. The ground felt malleable and on impact it absorbed all the energy contained within my descent. My neck didn't even get snap at a ninety degree angle. It was like hitting a trampoline, only with less surface tension that then tossed me back up

and then caught me again, like a large patch of rubber that undulated until I finally came to rest.

Now I could tell up from down or maybe I was sideways? My hair still floated around like I was in water, but I wasn't drowning. I think the short version of a longer story is that I'm in some place where the laws of nature do not apply.

"My pharaoh, the time has come." Came an ethereal voice from beyond and all directions.

"Susan? Is that you?" I asked, looking all over for voice's source.

"I have arrived to guide you. Although my power is limited... I shall be there momentarily."

That voice certainly belonged to her, but her voice was distant and not just because of distance itself. Her voice rang out like a lone voice in an auditorium, a phantom, through a veil that could very well be a veil separating whatever crazy physics defying place this was from the 'real world'.

With a puff of smoke and gold light, I was suddenly not alone. Hovering a couple of meters in front of my face with little black jackal ears on top of her head, a bushy black tail swishing back and forth behind her, shining gold jewellery and paws for hands and feet. It certainly looked like Shoshanah, but there was also something amiss.

It was a small creature, not much bigger than a fairy; about thirty centimeters tall or so. Her body was super deformed, like a cartoon character but she still had that serious and stoic expression on her face. I could feel lips try to curl up just looking at her, despite my best efforts not to. When she spoke, I nearly lost it.

"Now, chew the matter at hawnd." She said as though she had taken in a balloon full of helium.

I had to stifle a laugh that came out as a snorting in my nose.

"Chew are curwently... What?" She said, stopping her explanation to leer at me.

"No, nothing, just- just tell me where this is-" I replied, still struggling.

"Wike I sed. Chew now stand in the pwace- Waven!" She screamed, more pouted.

"What? It's nothing. P-please... just-"

She looked down at herself, realized her form and her shoulders dropped while a shadow cast over her face.

"Jwest get it ober with," She finally said.

I obliged by clutching my sides, that were about to burst, and then I hit the ground laughing. As hard as I tried, I guess I couldn't exactly wipe that expression of my face and it eventually made her self-conscious.

“Dis fworm is not my idea! And swtop laffing!” She continued to pout with tear droplets forming in her eyes. “I hawardly contwain enuf power to hwold dis spell as is.”

I rolled around on the ground laughing uncontrollably for a few seconds longer before I got it all out of my system and I could start breathing normally again. With a few long breathes and giggles later I finally calmed down, only to lose it to the chibi Susan floating over me with her arms crossed. I contained myself and slowly stood back up.

“Are chew done now?” She asked.

“Yes, sorry. I think I'm just a little stressed out and I needed that. Because let's be serious, you look ridiculous. Especially with that form and the way you-”

Almost lost it again.

“Especially with the way you're looking me right now.”

She was pouting even more-so than before now. Her cheeks were puffed out like a squirrel's mouth full of nuts or a blow fish.

“Dis is a swerious matter! Twime is wimited, and chew must be da arketech of your own sawation.”

“Then what is this?” I asked, while waving my hand at the darkness in all directions.

“Where,” The Anubis said, waving her paw. “A pwace much wike, chew 'ave been before. Dis is a pwace between hearts: Da 'Sheut'. Shadow. The pwace where you and she will 'meet'.”

Memories of the tomb that had collapsed and the sea of reeds returned to me. The boat of the Pharaoh and Susan who arrived later to retrieve me from that place.

But I still had no idea what she was talking about and she looked far from done.

“When I pwaced my eyes upon her, I notwiced something wrong. Words would not weach her. Not shake her. So I have bwought chew here. Chew will speak, heart to heart.”

“So? You're saying I have to find her in this... mess... And convince her not to kill me?”

“Cowect. Her Ib is cwosed, her ren is seaweld, her ba and akh is twisted and her ka powessed. Undo these things. Spweak to 'her'. If it is chew, her desire to end chew will be gone before sunset."

Wow, okay, so I can still get by with a good guess.

“So I'm going into someone else's head to play psychiatrist?”

“It will be her dowain. Chew must be careful.”

Now that part worried me.

“Are you... Are you saying that if I get hurt or die in there... I'll be killed for real?”

“What? No, Waven, don't be abswerd. If chew die. You will

awaken, so too will she and chew will be killed you faster than the eye can bwink."

So... she says tomāto, I say tomäto.

"But fwear not. For I shall hwelp and gwuide chew for-"

As she spoke, she began to slowly fade away. When I reached out to grab her, my hand went through empty space. It happened so quickly, I could only stare at her with the blank expression on my face until it was too late. I could only watch her fade away, refusing to believe it with the same face I had on while I was trying to understand what she was saying, or trying to say, with that baby lisp.

"Susan?" I asked the darkness.

No disembodied voice responded. There was only silence. There was nothing until I looked down. Approaching from infinity was a whole other world. It was rushing toward me faster than I had seen anything move in my life. It started out as nothing but a dot, but it soon took up my entire field of vision. I thought it might hit me, crush me, swat me away into the aether like a fly, but as it got closer, it slowed down. When it was close enough I noticed that it was a cityscape and when it was finally upon me, it touched against my feet gently and stopped. It didn't carry me along with it, it just came to a complete stop. Maybe I had flown toward it? Either way, it was as if I was meant to come here.

Or made to.

My feet felt like they were on solid ground once again, so I decided not to complain. It was hard cobblestone, but the masonry was all wrong. The roads snaking through the city that now surrounded me curved at odd angles and the buildings were crooked. Geometry was made a mockery of here; the buildings looked non-Euclidean. Nothing stood up straight, things curved and disappeared suddenly. When I looked up, I saw the world curl in on itself. There was no sky, there was only more of the city above me, as though the whole world were inside a ball only five hundred meters in diameter.

Not a single speck of color existed anywhere. It was all black and white. It was if I had wandered into world concocted by Tim Burton or Salvador Dalí.

There was also not a single sound. Not even the birds made a noise. They didn't even move. Pigeons mostly, but all sorts of birds sat there on the roof tops where they didn't even flinch. I could feel a thousand stares though and every time I took a step, the sound of my boot against the cobblestone was like thunder. The leather sole slapping against the stone and the metal clink of my heel and toe were being held up to an amplifier. The clip clop being broadcasted to the entire world, the knob stuck at eleven.

By far though, the most disturbing thing about this surreal world

was the lack of any people. Just birds that acted more like gargoyles. But then again, gargoyles do not come to life and fly away en masse That is what happened suddenly, at the tolling of church bells, the first sound in this world other than me. A chorus of flapping wings accompanied it, but soon those died down as the birds vanished into thin air. They had to have disappeared. There was nowhere for them to fly away to, the world was closed.

What worried me most though was, 'For whom the bell tolled?' That might be a stupid question... I believe my suspicions were not far off and I already knew the answer. From the black and white world, there were many shadows and from those shadows crawled a seemingly endless army of black shapes. I stood corrected, the lack of people was preferable to this and I chastise myself for thinking that and jinxing myself. They were all human in appearance, but the way many of them crawled out from the shadows like spiders, sticking to the walls, creeped me out. Their movements were also jarring, as though there were frames missing between how their arms moved in one way only to arrive too early and their heads twitched and the necks craned in impossible directions. What frightened me about the, was the two pale red dots where there should be eyes and every one of them was honed on me.

This was a world inside someone's heart. It wasn't mine, it was someone else's, but I felt as though I had fallen asleep and stumbled into a nightmare.

They spoke no words, there was only a chatter of whispers from countless mouthless figures crawling out from the shadows in every direction. They slunk out from the shadows and kept to the white, the light. I did my best to stay calm and not show fear, but I'm pretty sure I was failing. The only thing I could do was slowly back up toward a door leading into the building closest to me. I tried to ignore the shadow crawling down toward me from above, but when it almost got within grabbing distance I turned the knob which thankfully dislodged the door from its frame and it swung open. I turned my back and fled inside which was met with a hideous chorus of screeches and wails from outside.

The insides of the house were no different from outside, non-Euclidean architecture everywhere. Tables with two legs on the floor and two on the wall next to it. Stairs that corkscrewed to the second level. Walls that made rooms appear smaller before they looked infinite beyond that. I didn't lose focus though, I locked the door behind me and bolted it shut.

My journey through surreal cinema was long over, now I was living through House of the Living Dead as an army of shadows pounded on the door from the outside. Their screeches and wails were

like banshees, instance causing my blood to freeze and my heart to beat faster. I threw myself through the house which never seemed to end, but as far as I ran, I never reached the other side. It didn't matter how hard I ran, when the door broke down, it sounded like it was still only in the next room over as if I hadn't gotten anywhere at all.

I decided to turn right instead of running forward and was finally presented with a different room and another door. I didn't look back as I threw it open and found myself flying through the air. I was only a couple meters off the ground back outside, but there was not step or stairs and gravity had its hold on me once again to bring me back down quickly. The ground was no longer rubber too, so it hurt like hell. Luckily, I didn't break anything, so I picked myself up and ran. Sounds from a thousand angry shadows were behind me, I could still hear them.

Surreal streets curved at impossible angles and the buildings that accompanied them in their madness closed in on me from all angles. I navigated them the best I could, but no matter how fast I ran, the sound of chittering, chattering and angry whispers followed. I couldn't see them every time I looked behind me, but I knew they had to be there. Maybe they had returned into the shadows, or whatever world behind the shadows they came from; but that didn't convince me they had stopped.

When the wails did finally stop, it wasn't replaced with peace, no, it was replaced with something far worse. While dodging into a long and straight alley, a rarity in this crooked world, the sound of those terrible things stopped. But when I emerged from the alley I ran into something monstrous. It stood about five meters tall, had four long insect legs and two arms, curved back up into its body. A long abdomen, slender body just as long with a triangle head. I skidded to a halt before it and two large eyes just as red as the others looked down at me. They were large, and bulbous... Just like a mantis: The whole creature was a giant mantis.

Mandibles at the front of the triangle head slithered and slide against one another as the head twitched, its eyes still fixated on me. It raised both its arms and it was then I knew I was in deep shit. I didn't wait for it to act, I tumbled forward into a roll. Where I had been standing just a moment ago and where I landed mid tumble, its two extremities hit the cobblestone and caused a spray or rock and debris in all directions. I rolled underneath the mantis, got back up to my feet and kept running. I could hear its feet crunch the stone underneath it as it turned around to follow me.

I was foolish enough to look at it as it did so.

I crashed into a pile of boxes that had been minding its own business. I was buried underneath it all and my body reacted on its

own when the thunderous sound of four large insect legs scurried slowly across the wide street. I froze solid. I was powerless to do anything, I could do only nothing, but just that happened: nothing.

When I finally pulled myself from the wreckage, I was covered in fabric. Rolls of linen and the like and every single one was colorless: White, black or grey. The giant mantis was also gone and the shrieking shadows had not returned either. It was then that I noticed what may be the cause.

I still had color.

There probably wasn't much that stood out more than that. A stain of color in what was just black and white. Maybe that was the reason why I was beset upon by the denizens of this world. My existence was an abomination. With that in mind, I took those fabrics and wrapped myself in them. I had ladened myself down with so many sheets of white that I vanished underneath them. They were so heavy that I walked hunched over like an old man. But when I took a few tentative steps back out into the world, there was no cold reception. I think my hypothesis was proven correct.

I trudged and wandered the strange world for a few minutes longer, hopelessly lost. Nothing made sense, up became down and vice versa. Those things before were either guardians of this world and I was previously seen as their invader. Or they were the invaders in this world and I was competition that needed to be snuffed out. Either was just as troubling a thought.

My wandering finally came to an end when one sight grabbed my attention. A single house. One house among many, but there was one thing special about it. It wasn't crooked. All the buildings around it, all of the roads, were twisted and bent in unnatural ways. Sometimes in ways that there was no feasible way that it could hold itself together and not fall over. But this one house stood straight and was unmolested by the madness surrounding it.

I was drawn toward the house, the only thing that made sense in this crazy world. I approached the front door and placed my hand upon the door knob. No chorus of screams rung in my ears, no thunderous monster lumbered toward me, I was free to enter. Nothing was trying to stop me from entering. Maybe they would have if they could still see me, or if the sight of me still offended them.

As though I were previously a red door that had to be painted black.

The knob offered no resistance when I turned it and no bolt held the door in place when I pushed it open. Inside the house there was more sanity. The stairs toward the second floor were normal, the tables and chairs were normal and the furniture everywhere else was neither twisted nor impossible. One thing was different though, no, two

things were different. The table was set for a family of five with bowls of steaming soup with idle cutlery and there was someone gently sobbing somewhere inside the house.

I skulked around the house, hunched over like an old thief, and searched for where it was coming from. It sounded like a girl, not at all like the shadows outside that shrieked like the dead. It was pitiful and I felt compelled to find it. I didn't care if what I found wouldn't be to my liking or put me in danger. This was the only normal place in a very abnormal world. Whatever lived in this house, had to be something I could get answers from. Maybe this house had what I was looking for.

The cries came from the second floor, I guessed, so I carefully climbed them. The rails on the stairs were coated in dust as well. That told that something, someone lived in this place. My weight and all the rags covering me caused the planks of wood to creak, so I carefully draped them over the rails. I was afraid if she heard me coming, she might flee. If she was something living in this world, it must have to flee from the monsters that skulk and hide outside. Maybe she would flee if she heard me approach.

When I reached the end of the hallway on the second floor, the sobbing had reached its loudest. It was still muffled through a door, but if it wasn't a figment of my imagination, whoever was crying was behind it. I gently pushed down on the handle and let the door drift open without a sound.

Inside the room was a bedroom. There were four beds in total, one in each corner and a good sized window at the rear of the room. There was only one dresser with four shelves for each bed and except for the candle stick holders on top of that, there was nothing else in the room. Nothing other than a woman curled up into a ball, hugging her knees, in the right corner atop the bed there.

She too had color.

She wore a simple linen dress, white with a tinge of brown and ultimately dreary. Her hair was short, only shoulder length and no further, but femininely cut. She was thin, barefoot with her head buried behind her knees with her hands holding those tightly to her body. Her skin was a pale white, but I could not make out anything about her face.

So I took a step into the room, letting my shadow cast over it. When I entered, the door shut behind me. I did not expect it and it made me jump and it caused the girl to jump as well. She froze solid, as did I. Slowly, very slowly, she looked up from behind her knees and revealed her face to me. It was young, it was also pretty, with a small bridged nose, full lips: it was a face more beautiful than I had seen on any human girl since I had stumbled into this world.... But...

Indigo colored eyes.

Small almond shaped indigo eyes that went wide with disbelief when they were laid upon me. That disbelief soon changed to fear and that fear turned to terror.

The girl threw herself backward, her back pressing up against the corner when she had nowhere else to go. Then she screamed. It rang out louder than the church bells. Louder than the monsters that wailed.

I felt the whole world distort. The corner she tried to run away though stretched and vanished into the distance as she screamed and the world behind me stretched as well. And beside me. It was as if the whole world was pulling away from me in all directions except up and down. The room became infinitely big and I was standing in the middle of it, stranded.

The only thing there was anymore, was that poor girl's scream.

***

"But fear not. For I shall help and guide you forward through whatever realm awaits you." The Anubis said, but her words did not reach the one she spoke to.

Susan opened her eyes to see that the inky black world, the sheut, was no longer there. She was once again looking at the forest, strewn with debris from the train that had cascaded from above. Her heart stopped, her mind raced, she was certain she wasn't that devoid of divine energy. She looked toward Laven and the assassin who were still kneeling and asleep in front of her.

Why had she awoken? That wasn't the plan.

"Aha~. Now all the actors are on stage to play their role." Said a voice as jovial as it was sinister.

The Anubis' red eyes looked up and past the Pharaoh and his assassin. Standing side by side, were Rose and Chris with their backs turned. Their feet apart and hunched defensively. Rose's tail wished back and forth and smoldered. Her sword was drawn and pointed in front of her. Chris stood with one shoulder forward and the wing that arm was part of as a shield; the other arm she favored and protected by pointing back toward herself. Her long green tail likewise whipped around behind her anxiously.

Beyond them, standing upon the ledge overlooking the clearing was a man. Black of hair, robes and garments intricate and showing rank and position. An eye-patch across his face, the other eye shut permanently, yet a gaze could be sensed from it. Standing beside him was a mountain of steel with a sword almost as large as she. When she became aware of their presence, she also became aware of the other three surrounding the clearing: one behind and two to the side.

None of those three felt human and they were directing an acute desire to kill toward the five of them crowded near the center of

the clearing. The most vicious and palpable of all came from the man himself. When her gaze returned to him, his one eye was now open and the ferocity and madness of it chilled her blood. She could see his heart upon his sleeve easily and without effort.

It was black and twisted, yet believed itself to be just and pure. It oozed and dripped black, but shone with a golden light. It was like a black hole with an angel's halo around it. A heart in perfect paradox.

He spoke with bone chilling words once more, “Let the final scene of this accursed man's final act... come to a close.”

A woman's voice came from within that pile of armor which clattered as it saluted, “Yes, Master Zerin.”

Chapter 61

A pair of black boots crushes the debris of the forest underneath as their master glides onward. Each step he takes is slow and deliberate, the previous step no less savored than the one after that. In the still breeze his heavy robes rustle with each giddy step he takes, each one almost a skip. Beneath his one good eye lies a wide grin, now petrified, which gives the grown man an expression that would be more at home on a cruel child tearing the wings off a fly.

But unlike a child, the man has no innocence. Countless lives have met their end on the other side of that wicked and twisted smile. Like an upside down crescent moon, the twilight moments of each little fly's life. It's not gleeful pride from duty being fulfilled, it is worn while an experience is being relished. An experience that would crush the hearts of normal men, laden their souls with anguish, guilt and remorse. But for Inquisitor Zerin, it was all a pleasure most sublime. Nothing could compare to bringing judgment to those that he sees in opposition to his lord. The lord God of the heaven above and all below it: The Almighty.

His one good eye, brown, but reflected black; protruded from a sea of red lines that crisscrossed his eye. Sleepless nights, or profound madness? The answer to that question is beyond all those who witness it and even to the man himself.

Staying by his side, step by step, is a woman who towers over him. Her form is all but hidden behind the bulk of her armor. The nuances of her curves and the gender they display all hidden from sight. A golden gleam from luscious blonde hair escapes from underneath her helm and drapes over her shoulders. That gleam was no less so than the oily lacquer covering her giant sword that she slung over her shoulder. Unlike the twisted smile of her master, her lips which were revealed with the bottom third of her face that her visor did not conceal, were stoic. The fullness of those lips, the thin jawbones, chin and the wispy feminine voice were the only things that revealed the knight was a woman at all. Instead of a thing, a moving suit of armor.

From the other corners of the clearing their other allies closed in, their forms far more monstrous.

Another woman with long blonde hair melts out from the underbrush, her skin a pale white with pale blue eyes. Her body looks inhumanly light and she stands as tall as any other woman. But unlike other women, her ears were pointed and long, like knifes. Elven ears. Ears that hang horizontally from her head ten centimeters apiece. Even though her body is light, her curves are womanly and seductive and wrapped underneath barely enough clothing to cover it. A brown

scarf wraps snugly around her neck and covers the lower part of her face. A dark green leather tunic that hugs her closely like a corset with her cleavage shamelessly on display. A pale green cloak is wrapped around her shoulders and does its best to hide it all away, but it can't camouflage a pair of long slender legs, each slipped within two very high brown leather boots that reached up to her thighs.

Held steadily within her hands is a mighty looking compound longbow; a bow hewed from an ancient yew tree. Safely stowed away at her waist is a quiver filled to the brim with arrows. One she held between her delicate fingers shows they were each tipped with an intricate and deadly looking steel head. Despite her body, which looked as though it could snap in a gentle breeze, the wood and string of her bow bends and holds more power in it than a man four times her size could ever hope to muster. The spirit within that very wood was old when the empire was young and it is her willing ally. It bends to her whims, no less than her arms and legs.

Melting into the clearing, literally, is another girl opposite to the elf. She is formless, her body a red jelly in a shape mocking a human woman. She is translucent, light shines through her, but there are no organs within the slimy mass. Although she appears to walk, her legs are mere decoration. The arms, head and torso could easily return to nothing and just as readily take the same shape again. The slime girl glides forward on a pool of her own jelly where feet should be; she moves like an amoeba from the microscopic world. Her form is altogether a formality. Arms and legs that move much like a normal human’s would but stretch and bend unlike any human. There are no bones to break or muscles to tear. The womanly curves of her body, the shape of her hips, the plumpness and heft within her breasts, the beautiful face formed from the formless undulations of the rest of her body are all a facsimile.

Her 'face', the form the jelly took, was droopy and lazy. It is like an old tired housewife's, but it showed no such age or wear. Unnatural biology made her face pliable and therefore could be made to be unnaturally gorgeous. Yet that face with the lazy smile was also permanent. It was perhaps the only thing she could not change. Even as the body slithered and warped, that face of hers would never change. It was always the first thing to reappear after her form collapsed back into a pile of wet gelatin that then took the form of a woman. And no matter how she twisted herself, she always returned to that form with those curves and face. It is much like a curse, she had absolute control over her body, but she cannot deny who she is for any longer than a few seconds at a time.

The last of the three approached from behind. From the shadows of the forest canopy above she dropped down and landed as

silently and gracefully as a cat. All four limbs ended with paws, like a cat. From the base of her spine, swished a furry tail, a cat's. Sitting atop her head were feline ears, the girl's eyes yellow with thin black slits and teeth, pointed and carnivorous. The fur that covered her arms and legs from the elbows and knees down was orange and striped white, like a tomcat. A short crop cut of orange hair adorned her head from where her furry ears emerged. They are of the same color twitched with every sound they heard. The tail that swished behind her did so unconsciously and make her balance absolute.

A cat girl who was dressed like a thief. She wore a bandoleer across her flat chest brimming with long and dangerous looking daggers. All of them specially made for throwing, and her paws hid sharp curved claws within them as well. Like the other girls before her, the leather armor hugged her curves and skin, and her face, just as beautiful if not rough, gave a rowdy boyish appearance. But she shares a jovial expression with her master. A cruelty that can only belong to a cat which is almost alone in nature for taking delight in tormenting its prey.

The five unfortunate targets of their wrath were surrounded. Two of them were incapacitated, one was immobile and only the other two were preparing to fight. Rose the Salamander and Christophaclies the wyvern stood back to back; Rose's sword was drawn and the wyvern's sharp talons were at the ready. But the flame crowning the salamander's scaly tail sputtered and the one of the wyvern’s wings was clipped. However, not a trace of cowardice showed on their faces, nor had taken root in their hearts.

Shoshanah, the Anubis Priestess, sat kneeling on the ground betwixt the two incapacitated persons. Her shoulder was gravely wounded, but stable. But all her powers were being used to maintain a powerful ritual. A very delicate ritual. It melded two hearts, in this case, it took the heart of her pharaoh and cast it deep into the unknown depths of his would be assassin. It was there she was sure they would find their salvation, but as Inquisitor Zerin approaches, it might be their undoing. The assassin’s blade presses up against his face. With a single push, the mantis' scythe would plunge into his head, and kill him instantly.

Zerin's approach finally halted, but with a wave of his hand, his four henchmen slowly circled inwards.

“I knew if I followed her, she would eventually lead me here,” He said.

“We ain't got time for you, Zerin,” Rose shouted. “You can take a number though. We got all day.”

“Sadly, I am not here for a battle, Thorn Knight,” Zerin said snidely. “But these wretched are.”

He spoke waving his hand over each of the four girls in turn. Not a single one took offense or even notice. They themselves believed his words were true.

“Four versus two, tsk. “The wyvern said, clicking her tongue. “Hardly a fair fight.”

“Yer right.” Rose said, grinning. “He should've brought more.”

“An army's worth more.” Christophaclies responded, grinning just as much.

“I got back right corner.”

“Front right then.”

They both nodded and slowly pulled away from one another's backs and circled away to face off with the intruders.

“Susie!” Rose shouted out, "You take care of the- Oh hells.”

It dawned upon her too late, but it was a harsh truth that would have to catch up with her eventually. Shoshanah was sapped of all her strength. It took all her powers just to maintain the spell keeping the assassin in her slumber. The knight passed on the Anubis right. She ignored the Anubis completely and blocked the path to her husband on her left. To her right the slime oozed forward. Christophaclies was no better off. The elf had an arrow notched and ready, and the cat crept closer on all fours. Neither could she fly and swoop in with her wing as it was. Either way, she would expose her back to the enemy. Worse, it would give the archer a clear shot of Shoshanah, the mantis and her master.

The six warriors faced off and entered into a standoff. Meanwhile, Zerin continued his march onward. He walked amongst the Anubis, Laven and the mantis unhindered. He ignored Shoshanah and Laven for the time being and squat down next to the assassin and inspected the battered face of the mantis closely.

“Such a waste,” He said, obviously feigning lamentation.

Zerin reached out and brushed his hand through the mantis' shoulder length hair, yet she did not move. He brushed it aside and revealed the side of her head; bereft of human ears. There was only skull, white skin, hair roots.

“Such a waste,” He repeated. “For such a pretty face, to be twisted like this.”

His hand slowly continued onward to the girl's jawline, but he then suddenly seized the mantis girl by the chin and forcefully turned her head to face him. Zerin's face was full of disgust as he studied it.

“Abominable. Disgusting. Absolutely disgusting,” He spat.

The mantis did not stir, her sleeping face didn't even twitch, but Shoshanah did. She winced in pain as a terrible migraine wracked her brain. It didn't go unnoticed. Zerin watched the Anubis' reaction and

then let the mantis' face go, so that it could fall back. He stood back up, walked around the mantis and stood over the priestess. Her pain subsided, but she was still breathing heavily and sweating.

"A most curious spell," Zerin menaced. "Not a paralysis spell."

He looked back toward the mantis and then back toward her.

"Not a sleep spell either."

He looked over to Laven, his face almost twisting into a rage when he did so.

"But why 'him' as well?"

"Back off creep!" Rose raged and almost bull rushed toward him.

But she had to stop when the armored woman blocked her path and the slime behind her crept even closer while she was distracted.

Zerin sneered in Rose's direction and slowly looked back down at Shoshanah.

"Most. Curious. I have studied well, but never before have I a spell such as this before. Perhaps it is much like the one you used to cheat 'his' death with?"

He sneered as he said that, but then just shrugged. His mood switching on the fly once again.

"No matter. It suits fine."

"Leave this place posthaste," Shoshanah said, pained.

"No. I don't think I will," He said without having to think. "But this spell is your doing alone, isn't it?"

Zerin stepped forward and placed his hand on the scythe and tried to gently push it away from Laven. It refused to budge. He then put all his weight into it, but it still refused to move. Shoshanah, who was knelt behind him, hacked, coughed and whined as another migraine throttled her brain. He quickly pulled away this time and the pain the Anubis was suffering abated. She breathed heavily, painfully, but she stabilized and the spell was still unbroken.

"Good. It appears she will not get in my way," He hissed.

Shoshanah heaved and could not threaten him again, but he turned around and faced her regardless.

"With all four of you predisposed, I'll take my time and savor my vengeance."

She could only watch as the demented smile slowly crept back across Zerin's face.

***

An endless wooden expanse. That was all my eyes could see. The walls surrounding me which had been moving at breakneck speeds, as though I was traveling through a star field past light-speed, just as suddenly stopped. I suppose it didn't matter how many light-

years away they were by now, it was my heavens right now as far as I was concerned.

I had finally found someone else in this terrible place. At least someone who looked like they had a soul. She then went right ahead and screamed. In her terror, space and time bent just to push me away. Whoever she is, she has power over this place. That meant there was only one conclusion: This was her world and if that was true... She's the assassin I'm looking for. Even if she doesn't look like that assassin I'm looking for. I can't explain what just happened any other way and deny that fragile looking girl was the one who was so doggedly pursuing my death. It was a huge disconnect, but I had to face that fact. We seemed to have gotten off on the wrong foot too. As far as a stranger entering your house uninvited goes, I think this is a bit of an excessive punishment to be giving out so liberally. The whole banishing me to a world without limits and where a carpenter is apparently God. There really is nothing but planks of wood off into infinity and the ground I stand upon.

And a carpenter god? Who would ever buy into that?

My situation went from possibly positive to a possibly soul crushing. I had stumbled into what could any moment cause my mind to enter an existential crisis. All of it in the blink of an eye. I had to admit that was pretty impressive. If I had to walk forward for however long it took to get back to where I started... Back in that little room... I'd go mad long before then. Forget about a couple days, it very well could take months, years... millions of years. But that was the wrong way to approach it. This was inside someone's heart. Time, space and the laws governing both didn't appear to hold water here. If I could break them in the same way, I could hop, skip and jump back to where I was.

And then she could send me back just as easily. Both scenarios represent infinity in the exact same way. I would be doing either forever. The look of sheer terror in that girl's eyes when she saw me... It happened reflexively. Instinctually. I'm sure it would happen again and again, forever.

“Ugh, what a mess,” I said, aloud.

I snapped to attention.

“A mess...?” I said once again.

My voice.

“...Mess.”

That wasn't my voice. It was gruffer, like a frog had been shoved down my throat. The pitch and everything was all wrong too. It was a voice belonging to someone else entirely.

I looked down at myself, an idea that hadn't occurred to me since my world had grown to infinity and I was so small and insignificant compared to it. If had looked, I thought to myself, the

realization from that new perspective would drive my insane on the spot. But if I wasn't myself right now...

I noticed right away that I couldn't quite see my feet. I could only see the tips of my toes over a bulge from my waist. When I felt it, it was bloated, fatty. A gut. I haven't put on a pound of fat since I woke up in my ruined apartment weeks ago. Rather, I'd claim I've trimmed down and toned up some. My overall shape is different as well, the length of my arms and legs too. Short and stuffy. My fingers were ugly and pudgy. Mine were miles longer and slender in comparison. If I could remember my mother, she probably would have complained I should have learned to play the piano. Maybe I can. I just haven't had the chance yet... No, focus Laven, focus. This body was someone else's and so was the voice. It wasn't an obese man's, but it was rather heavy set man.

It made me feel ill. Not just nauseous, but a feeling of disgust that sunk into my very bones. It made me very...

Angry.

"Is this your idea of a joke, huh?" I yelled off into infinity.

This wasn't me.

"If you think you can lock me away here like... This... You've got another thing coming!"

I breathed heavily, my shoulders weighed down by the extra weight I was carrying around. It felt unnatural. I didn't dare try to see what I looked like. I had my suspicions and I didn't want my curiosity to get the better of me. More than the truth, I didn't want to throw up. I'd rather not let infinity and a puddle of bile from someone else's dirty body keep my company till the end of time.

My sudden transformation was the last straw my addled brain needed to accept my current circumstance. There was no way anything here was natural. This world was not run by any set of laws. Rather, it was ruled arbitrarily. By the wants and desires, conscious and subconscious, of a young woman. If that was so, then I was free to do things that were otherwise impossible.

And things otherwise suicidal.

The voice irritated me, that's all I could think of. A profound feeling of hatred boiled the blood in my veins and so I dug this body's short stubby fingers and the poorly manicured nails into the skin of its throat. It was painful, but I convinced myself it wasn't my pain... At least I tried to. In the back of my brain. From the amygdala, a bestial and primal fear arose. It was a fear of pain, of death. I beat it down and ignored it. I took deep breaths and wheezed as I crunched the throat in hands that were not mine, but under my control.

I dug those fingers into the skin. Underneath the skin. I felt the shivers of pain wrack my mind. A wet feeling of blood oozed over the

hands, and my breathing became heavy and labored. I could feel the cartilage of the larynx brush across the top of the fingers. I didn't stop. I closed his eyes and grabbed hold of his skin and yanked them apart.

Not only did I hear the sound of skin ripping, but I heard a crack of glass breaking. When I threw the head backward and looked up, I saw a fault line in the infinite ceiling of wood above me spread. With one more burst of courage I put all my strength into stretching those arms as wide apart as possible. The ceiling above me shattered in two. The whole world broke in half, even under my feet. That infinite world broke into pieces, it had shrunk to a billionth of its former size. It returned to the same room it was before. In both my hands were two halves of what appeared to be something like a human suit. I heaved, feeling the sting of agonizing phantom pain, but I was myself again. I dropped the two halves of the imposter to the floor beside me, and as the pain subsided, I looked down and saw the same girl who was still curled in the corner. She was less terrified now and more confused. Two parts terrified, three parts bewildered.

I took a step forward and left the shedding behind, but the girl flinched, so I stopped. I held out my hand and reached out for her.

“Now... This would be the first time we've met? Isn't it?” I said gently. “The name's Laven. I'm not here to hurt you. I am here to help you.”

She remained still as a frightened deer in headlights, but her eyes studied me cautiously. I did my best to appear as nonthreatening as I could; but, in the end, I could only hope she'd calm down. Perhaps I was the first new face she had seen in a long long time. If she thought the enemy of her enemy was her friend, me tearing him in half had to be more than an adequate olive branch. That too might be too much to ask because she just witnessed someone rip off their skin to reveal another man underneath.

But the girl didn't say a word. The first words came from behind as the door swung open.

“Alright everyone, up and at 'em!” A girl's sing song voice rang.

I turned around and saw the same girl walking briskly toward me, but without acknowledging me. She walked right past me and as I turned to watch her. I noticed she had vanished from the corner of the room. Of the four beds, three of them now had children sleeping soundly, or trying to, within them. When the young woman grabbed hold of the curtains by the window and threw them open, bright morning sunlight flooded the room and those who been sleeping moaned in protest.

“Sis!” A young boy complained as he tried to cover his head with his blanket.

“Tommie, you said you'd help father in the shop at dinner last night.” The sister said.

She then grabbed hold of the blanket and pulled it off the bed, along with the boy who hit the floor with a grunt. His hair was fair blonde and buzzcut. His face was covered in grease stains that refused to wash out and he looked no older than eight or nine years of age. There was definitely a slight resemblance in the shape of his eyes and his sister's. Another boy, only a couple years older, fished for a pair of eyeglasses that looked a size too small off a stand next to his bed. He didn't complain at all and looked like the opposite of his brother whom he also resembled. He hair was long though, past his shoulders and pitch black. Lastly, a very young girl who didn't look older than five stretched and yawned as she rose from her bed. Her hair was also black and matted. It was braided, as though she thought it would have been a shame to undue them before she went to bed. She didn't look very similar to her sister and brothers though. Perhaps she took after the other parent? She looked more gaunt and a little too slim compared to the others who appeared rather normal. It might be pessimistic, but realistic, of me to claim she would have slim hopes of matching her older sister's looks when she grows up.

“Morning, sis.” She said with the sweetest voice I had heard in a long time.

“Good morning Pepper.” The sister said, picking up the girl and holding her to her chest.

The little girl giggled and woke up fully as the two danced and spun about the room.

“Come on now,” She said. “Father already went to the baker's. It's time for breakfast. And Jerald, hurry up, you'll be late for class.”

It looked like any regular morning routine. I stood in the middle of the room trying to take it all in, but everything was changing so fast I could barely keep up. I was still myself when I looked down, but it was now I who had no color. The young boy named Jerald stumbled groggily from his bed and walked right through me as he went to fetch his clothes from the lone dresser under the window. It appeared I was a ghost privy to watching another world. A world that appeared to be only memories. But there was a feeling like a fishhook tugging at my brain. It is as if something or someone was trying to pull me away. Maybe I wasn't meant to be here?

From spooky city, to humble abode, to infinity and now memories. This all felt very much like a dream. Everything was fluid and nothing was coherent. One scene flowed into the next and they all mingled and mixed with each other freely. But try as she might, I wont back away now. There is something I need to see here. If I stay I

believe I will discover the truth behind the madness of this world. I needed to know that, or else my head would be the pièce de résistance on a shish kabob.

While I stood there pondering, the children had already poured out from the room and were heading down the stairs. The only one who remained in the room was the elder sister. She dutifully made the beds of her siblings, humming happily to herself all the while. I watched her closely and noticed the uncanny resemblance. Shortish brown hair, indigo colored eyes, a small bridged nose and slim almond eyes. Her eyes looked much wider though, brimming with light as they glistened. But there were no extra insectoid eyes, antenna, arm scythes or extra lower abdomen coming from her spine. She was human. Her skin was blemished and some of her features were ever so slightly different. A two hour Hollywood makeup session and a quick Photoshop edit later and she'd look just as radiant as the mantis girl. She'd only be lacking the killer instinct. Instead, she was singing. I was still having a hard time accepting what I was seeing. The two things were so wildly opposed.

I followed the older sister down the stairs when she finally finished and watched over the family as they ate together at the table. There was one new arrival, a man, perhaps in his late thirties. He had a great bushy brown colored mustache under his nose but not a hair on top of his head. He was also stringy as though his limbs were like twigs and a monocle that appeared fixed to his right eye. His blue eyes seemed very gentle as was his smile as he played with the youngest sister sitting next to him at the table. I think I found who she resembles most. That must mean the others take after... someone who wasn't present.

“Father?” The elder sister asked. “Will you be in the shop all day today too?”

“Yes,” He said in a gruff voice unbecoming of his stringy physique, but gentle and kind. “I just got the special order leather for Count Wellin's order. I'll need to finish his boots before the summer hunt begins. Leather arrived pretty late, so I'll have to work some hard days to get 'em done on time.”

“You said I could help!” Tommie shouted out with bread still in his mouth.

“I said you could watch. I'll be cutting the leather today. You can help me pound it out tomorrow though.”

The boy looked a little disappointed, but he smiled a little at the prospect of being allowed to hit something later. He got an earful from his older sister though, berating him for talking with his mouth full once again. It didn't quite get rid of his good mood though.

“And Jerald. The school master hasn't been upset at you

lately?"

"No father. I'm third in the class now for rune recitals. We'll be moving onto mathematical formula this week and-"

"Papa!" The youngest sister cried out.

"Pep? Oh, a tooth! That's good luck."

A baby tooth was lodged into the bread she was eating and there was a little blood that the father wiped away with a handkerchief. The girl didn't cry though, she was tougher than she looked. Jerald looked back down at his bread a little depressed he was interrupted, but he shied away and didn't try to bring up his classes again.

"I can keep watch of Pep in the shop for a bit, so you can go shopping for lunch and dinner." The father said, looking toward the eldest sister while still wiping the traces of blood from the little girl's chin.

"Sure papa!" She replied with a smile.

"Thank you, Minte."

So after evading death for nearly an entire day, I finally learn her name. If they were truly the same person. After breakfast was finished, the family disperses. Tommie, Pep and the father go off into the cobbler's workshop while Jerald and Minte head out the front door and then off in separate directions, bidding one another one last farewell.

I was apprehensive in leaving the house after last time; what with all the killer ghouls and the giant killer insect running amok, but when I stepped outside it was into the bustling cobblestone streets of a medieval town. There were clear blue skies above and various scents from the marketplace all around. I was still monochrome, and I passed through people and things like a ghost, so it was easy to keep up with the girl, but it was still an unsettling feeling to do so. I watched as she visited all the different shops and all the people had kind words and smiles for her which she returned in kind. Boys and men around her age approached her with their chests puffed out, but she only had the same greetings and smiles for them as she carried on. Even when they were insistent, they ended up fighting among themselves and she blissfully slipped away ignorant of their wolf like behavior.

With a basket in her hands that grew heavier and heavier as she skipped around the center of town, her brown dress fluttering at her knees as she did, I was overcome with a profound sense of peace. I followed dutifully, even with the hook still trying to pull me away. There was no stopping me now though; I was going to follow wherever this led to the end. When the sun was finally at the highest point in the sky and Minte's basket was filled with fruit, vegetables, eggs, bread, meat and sewing materials, she skipped her way home. She pushed aside the front door and saw Tommie and Pep playing at the table

instead of in the workshop.

"Tommie? Aren't you helping father?"

"Smould stopped by. Father shooed us out." He pouted.

Minte's cheerful smile pursed and became serious.

"Is he still here?" Minte asked.

"Yeah. That's why we're still out here."

She didn't seem bothered by the snarly comeback at all. Minte placed the basket on the table and walked toward the door leading to the workshop. The two other children look at each other, then got up to follow her. When she noticed, she had a chastising expression on her face.

"Go wait upstairs."

"Hey?" Tommie replied indignantly. "If you're gonna spy I wanna-"

"Go to bed Tommie. Or I'll tell father about the stray cat you keep feeding out back with your scraps."

His mouth hung agape, "You wouldn't."

"Sis..." Pep pouted, looking almost ready to cry from watching her sister's dire expression.

She squat down to her eye level and spoke to her gently, showing her signature smile again.

"Wait upstairs, Pep. We'll do some embroidery later. I got some really good thread from a deal today. Okay?"

The little girl thought for a couple seconds while she watched her sister's face, but she soon glowed and nodded her head. Tommie reluctantly took the younger sister by the hand, and they went upstairs together. When they finally vanished from sight, Minte went to the door leading to the workshop and stealthily opened it just a bit so that the sound of a conversation might slip through.

"-Please Mister Smould, there's been plenty of orders, but the leather hasn't been coming in."

"I am well aware, Nemitz. I also trade in the stuff. I have a keener understanding of how choked the current trade routes are than you."

Inside the workshop along with the father, was a man in gaudy looking clothes that looked befitting of a wealthy merchant. He was an older gentleman and his appearance... although his name was Smould, the name Mr. Potter kept rising from the murky depths of my own head. I had no idea why.

"Clearbrook Falls fell just a month ago. A whole town, walls and all, overrun in under a fortnight. The Duke's knights couldn't even slow them down. The night after that, the priests confirm the place is pulsating with the devil's own nectar. Half the town managed to get away while the others were taken prisoner by monsters. Now trade

routes through the east valley are all but done for."

"I understand Mister Smould. Really, I do, but I can't pay the rent if I can't work. I can't work because I don't have the leather. If I just had the leather, I could make a hundred pairs of boots and shoes in no time. I can pay you back soon, I promise."

"This isn't about short term loans, Nemitz. I'm strapped for funds too. I've lost a lot of contacts, contracts and stored goods already. All I got right now is the land I own and a few receipts for gold in the bank at the capital. But how am I going to get there when Clearbrook is overrun? And then with half of Clearbrook funneling this way, that means the same amount of land for a lot more people. That means the price of rent goes up. Everything is gonna go up. Are you going to put me, your landlord and one of your suppliers out of business? People are all smiles now, but the news just hasn't hit and sunk in yet. When the supply finally runs dry..."

"I understand, but please! I cannot afford it. I need my workshop and I have to look after my family. By myself. My eldest helps, but they... They don't have a..."

"Yes, Mister Nemitz, I am aware of the tragedy about your wife. One of the best seamstresses in all Terenberg. Wonderful mother and loving wife. But the plagues are just part of life; be glad you and your children did not suffer the same fate."

The father looked visibly pained by his words, but he still had to plead his case. He had to beg. This would be the part his children were not meant to see. It wasn't about negotiating anymore.

"Then please understand Mister Smould. I have one order I'm working on for the Count. Special order. A right proper and beautiful pair of hunting boots. A real master piece in the works. I can pay the rent for a month on em. They'll be properly cured, done and delivered in a couple weeks."

"The rent goes up, Mister Nemitz. This meeting is not a negotiation. It's a warning. Pay up your dues now... Or I'll find other tenants from Clearbrook who still have their wealth and a need for a roof over their heads. Stop wasting your money on that one boy of yours, for starters."

"Jerald is gifted! It would be a waste to have him work leather, the fields or a shovel. He'll be a right proper scholar and magician one day. You'll see! Just invest a little now, and we'll be in your debt. He'll be in your debt. He's the fastest improving student out of them all!"

"I cannot afford to think ahead right now. I only care about now. And right now, if you put each of them to work instead of coddling them, you could meet the new rent easily!"

Minte's father was taken aback. He fell back into his chair as

though the life had been sucked from out of him.

"...That ain't what Clara wanted."

"Neither would she want her children living on the streets. She's gone now and you have to accept you can't shelter them forever. I'm a father too, Mr. Nemitz, and my sons are all grown now. I would say I've been through it all and more than you. I have to worry now about what I'm going to leave behind for them. I refuse to leave them with nothing, and worse, debt! Debt I'd accumulate by coddling charity cases like the one you're trying to sell me." He said accusingly, pointing his fat but strong looking finger at the father.

Seeing Minte's father still shell-shocked and virtually unresponsive he walked over to his workbench and ran his finger over the tools, the samples of leather and all unfinished shoes that would remain unfinished without more leather and the like. Then Smould's eyes lit up. An idea had come to him suddenly.

"Nemtiz... You have a daughter of age now, don't you?"

"Minte?" The father slurred slight, coming back to life.

"My third son... He's becoming quite the merchant, just like his father. One day I'm sure he'll be one of the richest men in this town. And believe you me, this town will one day be a city when our grandsons are men..."

He turned toward her father, approached him and placed his hands on the arms of his chair while leaning over him. As though he were pinning him to the chair.

"He's still only a single man."

I couldn't see her father's reaction, but I just had to turn my head to look at Minte's. It was not a pleasant one. It was shocked and afraid. The way he was pinning him to the chair, this didn't seem like an offer was being made. This was an ultimatum.

"Only sixteen summers old. A beautiful little thing. For a bride's price... I'll let you own this little place. Not more rent. You'll also never have to worry about little Jerald's tuition ever again. I get my incessant son's whining out of my ear and hopefully grandchildren before I die. How does that sound?" Smould said, with a professional business smile on his face, the kind of smile you put on to hide something that stinks underneath it.

I wanted to get off the ride now.

***

The clang of steel and crackle of fire shook the small clearing and dust clouds kicked into the air masked the chaos of battle. A bright red salamander twirled round and round as she matched blades with the hulking armored woman. She parried her massive sword swings and weaved out of the way of her powerful blows. Rose dodged left then rolled right to avoid the surging mass of red jelly that pursued her,

hot on her heels every time the armored woman missed. A large sticky mass that sought to smother her while the knight pulverized the earth around her after every miss. The flame burning on her tail was very weak, and she was breathing heavily, but she still fought with everything she had.

On the other side of the clearing, the grounded wyvern dealt with two lithe and agile warriors leaping all about her. She was too slow to pin either down and she strained to put her bulk between them and Laven, kneeling helpless in the distance. She had many minor and superficial cuts and scrapes, a dagger sticking out from her thigh and a couple arrows sticking from her left shoulder. Nothing seemed to slow her down at all. Try as they might, the two girls struggled just to get by her hardy scales and impenetrable skin. They circled cautiously because one errant connection with her tail or talon could end their fight quickly. But therein lied the problem for Christophaclies, she didn't have a hope in moving fast enough to hit either. She could only try to out last them both and they were both well rested while she was already tiring.

Defeating either of them would be a bonus for Zerin's henchmen, because their real goal was to keep them busy. Busy while their master toyed with his catch.

“So little time? Or all the time I'll ever need? The anticipation is killing me.” Zerin joked to himself as he circled around Laven, the mantis and Shoshanah. “I've never had the pleasure of killing the same person twice... But 'he' has turned out to be rather detestable, so I think I shan’t want to again.”

He retrieved a stick from the forest floor and pressed the tip of it against Laven's forehead and tried to push him backward, but he would not bend. He then pushed from the side, but his still body wouldn't falter. It was as though the two of them had turned to stone, yet the stick left marks and small cuts where trickles of fresh blood came from. He showed no pain or discomfort, but Shoshanah grit her teeth and bared with a crippling migraine.

“As I thought. You must channel this spell for it to hold. How admirable of you to do so even under the most strenuous of circumstances.”

Zerin turned his attention away from Laven and toward the Anubis and then viciously kicked out and stomped on her shoulder's open wound. The dirty treads of the boot's sole ground down on the wound and she yelped out, like a struck dog. Yet she hardly budged at all. She kept her back straight and suffered through the pain as he twisted his boot over the wound.

“Admirable for a monstrous bitch like yourself!” He laughed.

Zerin didn't laugh for long though. After the initial shock,

Shoshanah cries and tears stopped and she glared at the inquisitor with burning red eyes. Seeing how she wasn't suffering, he pulled back his book and stepped back. He clicked his tongue in disappointment.

"You're interfering with powers beyond your understanding." She growled at the madman.

"Powers?" Zerin lashed out with sarcastic outrage. "Ha! There are only two powers in this world. The Almighty's and the Damned. I understand what I'm seeing right now. It is by his grace alone I find myself here to enact his will. I will see that difference is upheld."

He turned his back to her and toward Laven once more, and she called out to him again.

"Yet you're incomplete while my Pharaoh is greater than before. What a pitiable god yours is. Or perchance, your god is merely cruel?"

Zerin stopped in his tracks and turned around very slowly, his face nearly boiling over with rage.

"You stand here now not because of providence but because of fortune. Blind luck... The devil's own luck." The Anubis sneered.

A large clatter interrupted their conversation. A helm flew through the air and landed near the two of them, golden locks of hair flowing out from it. In the distance, Rose stood still at the apex of her sword swing and a headless mass of iron stood stock still on the battlefield. The Helm rolled but eventually lost its head, and it rolled until it hit a hunk of train debris. That is where it came to a stop, it's face buried in the leaves.

Before Rose could boast or even move, the slimy red jelly surged up from underneath the leaves and twigs to wrap around her legs. She was taken off guard, but she couldn't plunge her sword anywhere to harm the slime. Everything she cut off just oozed back to the main body and reattached itself. Then the suit of armor eerily moved on its own and raised the sword over its shoulder and swung it across like a baseball bat. Rose's tail tried to explode, but it sputtered instead, the jelly didn't even react to the paltry heat she gave off. The flat of the blade connected with her abdomen and tore the salamander from the floor and the grip of the red slime came loose with a pop. She was sent flying into the trees nearby, cracking the bark on impact. Gravity then peeled her off and dropped her bruised battered and winded on the ground below.

"Awwww~ You held it the wrong way~" The slime cooed.

She then slithered across the ground to retrieve the decapitated head and then returned to the body still standing with the sword extended at the end of its swing. When they were joined, the

body shook and started to move freely once again.

"Forgive me. I could not see." She calmly replied.

Shoshanah looked on, her eyes wide with fright at the spectacle and concern for Rose. It was Zerin's turn to sneer this time.

"Luck? No. Only keen planning and foresight. Cheating death is not a unique talent to your kind, priestess. I have only one master and that is my God. I bow not even to death. She bows to me and I will not relent, not until my time given to me by my god expires. No matter how brittle my bones become."

He raised his voice and commanded the armored woman.

"Be sinful, Zoe! That crime I absolve you of, only if lay the Thorn Knight to rest!"

"Yes, Master Zerin!" Zoe bellowed out and saluted.

Several runes appeared all over the armored woman's shell. They glowed a radiant white until they burned out and one by one. And one by one, the pieces of her hulking armor fell off and clatter into piles on the ground below. Armor around her thighs, her arms, abdomen and chest fell off bit by bit. Soon the heavy suit of armor seemed more like a cage in hindsight. What was left was a sensual and seductive suit of armor and clothing that revealed stockings underneath with just a thin strip of skin before armored briefs around her waist. Her breast plate was just that, hugging her breasts and showing off ample cleavage along with every sensual and feminine curve of her body. She removed from her head a band that had rested on her forehead, knife like ears similar to the elves hung freely from the sides of her head once they were freed. The sclera of her eyes turned from white to black and the blue in her eyes burned bright with ethereal fire.

One of the headless knights. A dullahan freed from her shackles by her master. A knight from the other world that deigns the time of death for mortal men. With the extent of her powers, she has decided that it is not her master's time. Shoshanah quickly understood. She didn't have to wait for Zerin's explanation.

"You're a despicable and evil man." She spat.

Zerin laughed manically, "Ha! I am the Lord, my God's, sword on this world! My mission is his will and he is a vengeful God. A god who sees his garden infested with weeds and pests. Filled to the brim with men who forget it is by his light that creation exists. It is his plan they deviate from, and I am sent here to walk this earth to do my part and put order back into that garden!"

He moved his hands like a preacher with a fire in his belly. They were not practiced words, they were spoken from his heart. He believed every word of them.

"This is not a world of just men, Zerin!" Shoshanah retorted.

"There are no monstrosities in God's plan! You are an

afterthought, an invader in the order that was perfect for a thousand years! Your kind steal men's souls. You weigh them down with desires of this temporary world. This wretched and imperfect world. A world our ancestors nearly destroyed soon after its creation. But in his infinite mercy, he forgave us. We who did not deserve it. Such is his grace and mercy. He let us steward it under his watchful eye. His world, his greatest creation that we stained with sin! The only thing we mere mortals can create. But men are more than sin. But that is all you are, monster. Sin! Lust! Wrath long before that in the ages of Demon Lords past! Your forms have changed, but not what you are! The deaths you cause now are far crueler. Something that would have been thought impossible when the armies of Demon Lords raped, murdered and pillaged across the world. Now you rob men not of their lives, but of their souls and condemn them to the depths of oblivion. When the Almighty declares their time on this world is over, so are they. They do not pass over to the next world. To the heavens above and in his splendor. His world which is untouched and unmarred by our sin. Why? Because we left our sin behind in this world and refused our soul to be weighed down by it!"

"Your god is mad!" Shoshanah cried out. "There exists no god so petty, so tied to the material world."

"Your gods are dead. You are abandoned. Forgotten!" Zerin raged, spitting with every word and almost frothing at the mouth. "One day you and the pagans will understand that. But until then, I will not allow heathens like you to corrupt the minds of the innocent. To spread and multiply and throw my lord God's order into chaos!"

"Your vengeance only begets more violence. You sow the very seeds of your own demons!"

"I struggle to realize God's plan. I understand my place in it and that is all."

"Ignorance is no excuse for any crime. You'll offer remuneration for every transgression you've committed, Zerin. You cloak your heart in righteousness, but I see it for what it truly is. Dark. A cruel man. One who delights in the suffering of others and is incapable of guilt or sympathy. A petty murderer who screams the name of his to justify his worldly pleasures."

Shoshanah barked at Zerin, but she was still kneeling, effectively pinned to the spot. She could not move or lift a paw in resistance. The moment she did, the moment she tried to attack or even defend herself or her precious Pharaoh, the spell on the mantis would lift, and he would then immediately be killed not by Zerin, but by the assassin.

"And to justify 'your' actions?" Zerin rebutted, now screaming with his eye flared wide open. "Leaving a wake of chaos behind you? I

see through your 'cloak' as well. Prim and proper. Stoic and calculated. You're just a monster in the end. You lust for your mate just like any other beast in heat! Your scion of chaos. An unnatural aberration that must be cleansed and ripped out properly, least it returns like rot. An abominable life I seek to end with my own hands and offer to my lord! A mutation in the grand plan, unburned by even God's purest water for his debauchery and laying with monsters. I will not let even one of the Arc Assassins take that from me!"

"My Pharaoh has a heart of gold. You could muster a million of you and search the depths of each and every heart but for a single grain of gold and you'd never match it. Your hateful God cannot scratch him, because Laven has a heart far lighter than he."

"Pharaoh? So he is your god king then? Is that how it is? Then let me impart you with one important lesson."

With hands unnaturally fast, Zerin produced a stiletto from his robes and twirled it around effortlessly in his hands. He then threw his arm outward toward Laven. Just as suddenly as he had lashed out, he returned his hand and small sharp blade to his side. He then walked over and squat down beside the Anubis and stared at the unconscious man. From his cheek, a trail of blood trickled down. A fine cut into the cheek about six centimeters long and thick enough to cut through half the cheek's flesh. He then spoke three simple words to her: gravely, seriously and maliciously.

"Gods. Don't. Bleed."

Chapter 62

The inquisitor's magnum opus builds ever closer to its final crescendo. One bow strike and wail of a violin's string is written with the first pen stroke. A trickle of red flows steadily down Laven's cheek. The ink drips onto his thigh and stains his denim. The deranged artist's music sheet, slowly comes together, note by note. Zerin could barely contain his excitement and his hands shook with giddiness. His twisted childlike smile could deceive a naive witness into believing it was all a random act of violence, but no violence from this man was random. He delighted in every moment. He took pride in every detail. Each act of malice was planned carefully. Every wound was premeditated. From the first, to the last. Two onlookers watch as the lifeblood slowly oozes forth and weaves through Laven's five O'clock shadow. The Inquisitor who revels in his handiwork just like an artist admiring the latest brush stoke of his masterpiece while Shoshanah bites her tongue and suppresses her rising temper. Ever the sane philistine. The man with the black hole heart is toying with her. Trolling her for any reaction.

The priestess focuses her energies so she might fight back in the only manner available to her: defiance.

The inquisitor squats beside her while he watches, but when he sees the steely expression on her face, he frowns. With a disgruntled harrumph, he stands back up and walks back behind the helplessly kneeling Laven.

“You see, what can bleed can also die,” Zerin says. “And anything that can be destroyed...”

He walks around Laven's back, to his other side, and then kicks the unconscious body with all his might. The toe of his black boot connects with Laven's upper arm, but even then, the body does not move. But it is for the worse. It is barely audible, but Shoshanah's acute canine hearing perceives a distinctive crunch.

“...Is first something that can be broken.”

There was no doubt that Laven's humerus had fractured because of the vicious blow. It hangs limp at his side while Zerin walks away from the body, frozen in stasis. Yet Laven's body didn't budge, not even an inch. There is no anguish showing on his face. The only anguish is the strain put on Shoshanah. It forces her to lurch forward and stop herself from doubling over by planting both of her paws onto the earth. Another migraine wracks her brain as she fights to keep the ritual in place. Neither Laven nor the assassin stirs, standing as a testament to the concentration and power of the priestess.

The inquisitor expected the girl to writhe in pain or at least whine. He hoped she would beg him to stop, but the screams did not come from the anubis. A blood curdling roar erupted from the Thorn

Knight whose eyes filled with blood lust after witnessing the torture. Her nostrils flared and her teeth bared, the fire on her tail erupts with an explosion, and the salamander throws herself forward in Zerin's direction. The dullahan, who was no longer weighed down by her restraints, easily intercepted her, but she met the full force of Rose's fury. She collided with Zoe, their swords clashing and sparking off one another, but it took another three meters of the armored boots of the dullahan digging into the ground to halt her.

Zoe's back begins to bend as Rose pushes harder and harder on the dullahan. She has no choice, if she does not stand her ground, the Thorn Knight will blow right past her and descend upon her master. With the look that is in her eyes, he will be torn to shreds. But she has another worry, her head might come loose and fall to the ground. If she loses sight of the salamander, an equally fatal outcome will occur comparable to being bulldozed to the floor. There is nothing she can do though, she miscalculated the strength left in the Thorn Knight, but as she slips and falls backward, a red mass surges forth and wraps around the salamander's head.

Rose's eyes bulge as the jelly like substance wraps around her neck and throttles her. A substantial pressure crushes her head in all directions as well while the rest of the slime girl's red mass pours out of the forest debris and begins to coil around her body. But steam begins to rise from the jelly's body and the liquid soon bubbles and froths. The slime lets out a cry of pain. Because she had no mouth in which to scream at the time, the noise is like a kettle's whistle. She curls and stretches like a rubber band and slingshots Rose backward into the trees with great force. Her back slams into the tree beside the one she had nearly knocked down before, but when she hit the ground again she stumbles back to her feet much faster than before.

The Thorn Knight staggers and has to hold onto the tree trunk so she won't keel over. Her claw and talons dig into the bark, and the tree bursts into flames. Her body temperature continues to flare out of control, and the bark crumbles into ash on contact. The fire continues to spread until the whole tree is consumed by fire. Zoe gathers her head and stands back up while the slime curls in on herself to extinguish the parts of her 'body' that are still smouldering. They both watch with worried expressions plastered to their faces while the tree combusts and turns to ash just from being touched.

“You said she'd be slower, weaker.” The red slime complains.

“She is, but a salamander's strength and speed comes from high temperatures. External or internal.” The dullahan's glowing blue eyes narrow. “She bested me in the desert while I was sealed. But...”

“But what? I don't boil easily, you know?”

“Why else do you think Master Zerin brought you along?” Zoe snaps. “But she battled the Green Reaper for some time, so how can she still fight like... like this? At this intensity... I don't understand.”

Zerin looks on while sweating bullets. His forehead has an oily sheen, but when he sees the Thorn Knight repelled once more he turns his attention back to the matter at hand. There is a greater sense of urgency in his actions, the raging Thorn Knight has not failed to shake him. And Shoshanah fells it as well.

“It would behoove you to gather your allies and withdraw. If you believe that you will not be met with an even greater fury should any further harm come to Laven, you will find yourself... Sorely mistaken.” She says.

Zerin is not deterred at all. Instead, the smile returns to his face.

“I am willing to pay whatever price my lord levies upon me. So long as my duty is done, I will go to my final rest in peace. I would think that out of all you, you would understand that most of all.”

His grin widens even more, and the anubis bites her teeth together and glares at the man.

“You were there. When I was prepared to lay down my life to rid this world and his order from this 'man's' chaos.”

“Lay down the life of another.” She barks back.

Her words seem to pour over him like water on a duck's back, “These scars of mine are a testament to my devotion. My unwavering commitment to protecting The Almighty's plan. When I was dug out from the rubble, I gladly accepted the loss of my eye and my crushed body as payment for ridding the world of this... abomination of a man. But time passed. As I healed, I heard word of a man in Vilmheim who left allies of the Church in shambles. I heard from Domdracveria that the whelp of a princess mutated into a sinister and wretched form. She seized control of the nation after incinerating its rightful ruler. The north began to slip into anarchy. There was one thing that tied them together. One man and his motley crew of wretches. Yet, I had watched the same earth that nearly killed me bury him as well. Before that, I watched a powerful spell rip asunder his very lifeforce.”

Zerin's fiery passion and preaching grows and grows as he throws and waves his arms around. But then his eyes and the tone of his voice become grave and serious.

“How could it possible? That is what I asked myself. I refused to believe it. I almost cried out to my lord about the impossibility and injustice of it all. But I realized that the same thing that prevents his righteous justice from searing away his very soul spared him. An unnatural presence that defies all order and God's

plan.”

He slowly turns his eyes downward to the anubis, and a creepy smile spreads across his face.

“But what could mend a shattered lifeforce? I thought about it long and hard, but I understand now. I am still willing to suffer for my lord, but are you, priestess, willing to suffer the consequences of your own actions? Tell me, 'judge'. One so mighty and honorable, she who upholds the law and dares to judge the hearts of men living and dead... Just how severe a crime was it to trample upon the laws you are sworn to uphold in order to have saved your 'Pharaoh’s' life?”

Shoshanah's face slackens. Her eyes lose their luster and she feels a powerful blow to her spirit. She feels a cold shudder as the inquisitor looks down upon her with a sinister and twisted expression. He delights in her slumping shoulders as her mind reels. Her mind races to answer just one question.

How did he know?

***

It was a fancy marriage, there was even a carriage. No expense was held, but from where I watched it all unfold, it all seemed calculated and fake. Church bells rang, people lined up and cheered, but it all seemed like a petty distraction to me. Another town, no further than fifty kilometers, had crumbled and their refuges were bound to soon flood the streets, yet the ale flowed. It was almost a small festival. Had Smould not just claimed his own coffers were running low? But that was all paltry to what came next, that which was more bitter and yet to unfold.

I watched the day unfold as I stood by the side of the bride. Everyone wore smiles, genuine and fake, but not her. Minte's expression was melancholic, sometimes I thought she might even be brought to tears. When I looked upon the groom, I think I was beginning to understand everything. I was slowly being consumed by a feeling of dread and it was growing more profound by the moment. I didn't just see him, I felt him. That feeling clung to me like clothing... like skin. He looked very much like his father. All the man, who looked to be in his early thirties, lacked was the bald head and wrinkles. The male pattern balding on the top of his head told me of that inevitability. His heavy and chubby frame filled me with an unusual sense of disgust. A familiar sense of disgust.

He had a well practised smile, a business smile. It made me almost forget that feeling of disgust, but from somewhere those same feelings of revulsion soon boiled back to the top. Once the vows had been said, and the girl had reluctantly given hers in return, I had to turn my head and look away. The whole spectacle which had been painted in bright colours smelled rotten to its core.

A girl who was nearly trembling had been walked down the isle in a pretty white flowing dress by her equally melancholic father. The reasons why tumbled through my head again and again. I could almost feel the thoughts tormenting the poor girl inside her head. She had spied in on her father and Mr. Smould, so when they finally approached her, she knew what it was about. She had walked away from the door looking dead. Minte hadn't even touched the thread or kept her promise to her younger sister to teach her to embroider. When they asked if she would agree... She didn't hesitate for long, and she said yes.

What other choice did she have?

They never brought up what would happen if she refused. Could she have refused? She was her father's daughter, after all. I wasn't back home. What right did she have to refuse in this place? They asked her first, but I watched as the tension escaped from her father's shoulders when she agreed. It was only when he walked her down the isle that I saw no sense of relief, but apprehension on his face. Yet he did nothing. He reached the end of the isle, then walked away and took his seat. He watched the rest unfold. Everyone watched as it happened, but they did not see what unfolded afterwards.

Would anyone have stood up then? Could they have?

The hook still pulled at my mind, but I remained. I had to bear witness to the reason for the scream and the infinity from before.

It is something that follows naturally after a marriage. I would have stayed away from it if I could have, but when I strayed from the girl, the world began to fall apart and became a dark void. My perceptions were tied to the poor girl. I would fall out of this dream, this nightmare, if I did not stay. There was a duty I had to see through now. I did my best to look away, to afford her the privacy she deserves, even in her memories. But just because I couldn't see it, I could still hear it.

The cursing, the hitting, the abuse and violence. Something that naturally follows after the ceremony. Something away from prying eyes. Every pair except mine. The feeling of revulsion made sense now, but it was something I wish I had not known. Still, the hook pulled at my mind.

Sedrick. Sedrick Smould. That was the man's name... The husband's name. I soon learned that the smile he wore was not just professional, but fake. There was a cruelty underneath the likes of which I had not seen before. A blatant disregard for compassion not borne from a zealous sense of duty or contrived sense of right and wrong, but instead given form out of putrid selfishness. His malice knew no mercy, not even in the face of tears. How many times did I have to hear him say it. Words that made my blood boil.

You are mine. You obey me.

From the small but cozy townhouse in the heart of the town, to a luxurious manor on the edge of town. From bread and laborious hardship, to plenty and servants to wait on hand and foot. Yet as the memories blended together, and the spring turned to summer I only saw the life drain from the eyes of the poor girl. She sat by the window on the top floor and watched the town from afar. Home was so close, yet so far away. I never once caught a glimpse of a memory that was not within the confines of this manor. This prison. Never did I even see a memory of guests, she spent days secluded within the manor. The only company the maids both young and old along with the friendly waves of the men working the land around the manor.

She never waved back.

The nights were no better. Bruises and scars hidden underneath her dresses spoke of that. They were never on her face. He was smart enough for that. Sedrick would return at night, always at night. Sometimes he would be gone for days, but he always returned. When he did, he was always angry. It was as if his smile infuriated him, so when he returned home, all that pent up frustration only had one outlet. I had to look away every time, but I couldn't get away from hearing it. I could always see the marks it left afterwards.

And no one came to her rescue. Was that why she spent all her time looking out the window?

I watched months of memories swirl about in a maelstrom, but that all came to a sudden halt on one early fall evening. The world was spinning and spinning, until it stopped as though a hand had grabbed hold of the wheel with a loud slap. That was just what happened, the poor girl was sent sprawling to the floor as a furious Sedrick had returned home once more.

“What good is a dry and shriveled up cunt like you?”

The body of the girl curled up on the expensive rug on the floor. She cradled her face in her hand. The rug was white but now had splotches of red.

“I said I wanted sons, but you can't even give me anything. You defective whore.” Sedrick growled. “I buy you nice things, expensive things. You never even smile. I take you out of the shit hole and give you a nice place to live and you mope around all day. All that, and I only ask one thing in return: Sons!”

He stomped over, grabbed her by the hair and pulled her up so that he could stare right into her dead expressionless face. She didn't even have the strength or presence of mind to wail.

“If I had wanted a barren useless woman like you, I would have just rented you from your father instead. I wouldn't have needed to go through all the trouble of marrying you. You're a bad investment.

You ain't a wife, just a pretty doll. I could pay for any cheap pretty doll for far less."

After all the abuse... The only change I had noticed in the girl was that her face had become more gaunt. Her body became stringy, and I hardly had any memories of her eating much at all. She just looked out the window most of the time. I bet she was thinking of home. But she dared not speak, so she dared not ask how they were faring.

Sedrick grew bored with Minte, he let go of her hair and let her slump back down to the rug.

"Whatever. You just need to be a mother one way or another. Until then... If you can't function like a woman should, then you can earn your keep another way."

It almost sounded like a goodbye, but that was just wishful thinking. I found myself a roiling phantom of rage, but no matter what I did, I passed through everything like a ghost. I couldn't harm the man nor help the girl. But even now, the hook pulling in my mind was relentless. However, now it was getting stronger and stronger. It hurt more and more and time went on. But even now, after everything I had witnessed, I dared not stop till the end.

Wherever that took me.

Sedrick returned to the manor less often as the summer months came and passed and as fall turned to winter. But the comfy room and life of the girl was torn out from under her. The fancy dresses she wore, for no one else to see, were replaced with common rags. They were same rags that the servant girls of the manor wore. The luxurious bed, dining table and food she had ignored were replaced with straw and gruel. The window she wasted her days away looking out of was replaced with chamber pots. If she could not be a wife and a mother, then she would be a maid. Is that how it is, Sedrick?

Even then she did not know peace. The master's visits were less frequent, but they still occurred, and he always returned home furious. All the servants were wary of her at first, but as time went by, they stopped treating her with gloves on. After-all, she was not there because she had the favour of her husband. Their caution did not turn into sorority, it turned into passive aggressive torment. Their master's cruelty was not limited to only her. I bet these girls had nowhere else to go as well. The pay with room and board they got within the manor was better than the streets I'd wager. Now there was even someone below them for their own frustration to go. There was never any consequence for small pranks and mean spirited comments. They were never chastised for the muck she got herself into and the blisters that covered her from the work she did.

Except for one person.

Another young girl, like herself. A frumpy and homely girl with freckles and perpetually rosy cheeks. She never seemed to be in the good graces of the other servants both young and old. Perhaps she felt some sort of bond with the girl who became the 'new girl'. She was friendly and was always smiling, but Minte never did return it. That didn't stop the girl though. Minte barely acknowledged her existence at all to begin with. I could tell, because as the weeks and months worth of memories flew by, I never even heard her name.

Fall turned into winter and rough winter at that. The days came and went, but suddenly the doldrums and the hideous memories came to an end. Beneath the manor and in the cellar I found myself with Minte, looking even worse for wear, peeling potatoes with a peeling knife. It was a dingy and dirty place. Rats squeaked in the corners of the room but were not brave enough to scurry into the light where the mounds of potato both peeled and not were piled up. Into that dark and depressing place came Sedrick.

His face was flushed red, and he was not steady on his feet. He did not look the part of a happy drunk at all. This was also the first time I had seen him in such a state. Perhaps he did so often while away on 'business', but it was a first for him to be like this in his own home. His shirt was unbuttoned and his ugly hairy chest was exposed along with his gut that hung over his pants that were not properly buckled.

The hook pulling on my brain started to become even more excruciating.

“Hey, Minte!” He slurred. “Get over here!”

He fumbled down the stairs slowly as he yelled, but Minte did not even budge. She just continued to peel potatoes.

“Hey! I'm talking to you, cunt. You dry, withered up cunt. You go deaf while I was away too?”

The rats fled as his unsteady footsteps took him across the cellar.

“Look at me when I talk to you! And smile! Show me that cute little smile of the little girl in the marketplace. The cute little smile I fell in love with.”

He walked up behind Minte who was still sitting on a short stool and peeling the potatoes, unperturbed. Sedrick's grubby and stumpy fingers caressed her thin shoulders while he leaned down and took deep breaths of her hair. His breath stunk, and I could smell it from where I stood and watched helplessly from about three meters away. I could only clench my hands into fists to the point they hurt and almost bled.

He quickly flipped and went into a rage when she didn't react, “Stop being a cold fish, you bitch.” He slapped the back of her

head hard and continued to yell at her, slurring his words all the while, “I put you here to teach you a lesson. You think just 'cause your pretty and now rich you can do what you like? You remember the wedding vows. Love, cherish... and obey! Now smile!”

He grabbed hold of her chin and turned her head so hard and fast I was afraid he might snap it.

“Smile!” He screamed.

I couldn't quite see the expression on her face from where I was watching, but Sedrick's mood didn't improve. He threw her chin away, and Minte was knocked off her stool and into the pile of unpeeled potatoes. He didn't help her up, he just seethed, fumed and paced back and forth. I understood what was going on now...

Sedrick was a cruel and clueless man. A man who had been captivated by pretty plumage, caged a song bird, taken it from its flock and then rattled its cage when it refused to sing

“What do you want, huh? I give you nice things, and I get nothing. I punish you, and you don't even say you're sorry. Who the in the hells do you think you are? You're just some poor cobbler's pretty little daughter. What do you think the world owes you, huh? You wanna go back and wallow in that shit hole of a town? Do you? Like all your poor worthless peasant friends?”

He continued to pace back and forth while the poor girl was still a little stunned and was failing to pull herself from the pile of potatoes that had now crumbled and started rolling all over the floor of the cellar.

“Maybe I ought'a send ya back home then? I can arrange that too.”

Too?

“Your family can say goodbye to that home of yours and the shop. That limp dick little brother can say goodbye to school too. Unless your father goes to work in the fields. Little skinny man like that. Maybe he'll last a harvest or two. The younger brother, the stupid one, he's still small, shove him down a few chimneys to clean. I hear those kids today live to see thirty more often. Black lungs and all. Maybe bring enough coin back so ya don't starve.”

He stopped pacing back and forth and now stood behind the poor girl and continued to yell and slur at her in a drunken rage.

“That sound better to you? No? Then smile, ya cunt. Smile and say you're sorry!... Still no? Then how about you start by showing papa those tits of yours!”

Minte was still pulling herself up from the potatoes, but didn't say a word. Sedrick reached down and grabbed the back of her maid's dress and pulled back as hard as he could. The sound of tearing cloth filled the cellar.

“Used goods like you though, ya won’t find someone like me willing to take you in. Maybe you can turn tricks for coin in the alley. You and your family gotta eat after-all. But only if you learned to not be a dead fish all the damn time and smile a bit. That pretty face of yours ain't gonna last. Your little sister though... Yeah, she's got longer... I know there are enough creeps in town that would do it even now. How does all that sound?”

The hook in my mind was pulling hard, but there was something else stirring. I felt my own sense of rage at what I was watching unfold, but it was nothing in comparison to a revolting feeling that was lumping in my stomach. I felt as though I was going to throw up. A knotted bundle of some foreign ichor swirled around inside my gut, and it paralyzed me to the spot. It worked its way up to my heart, and I could feel it beat faster in response.

Sedrick grabbed hold of Minte's wrist and the back of her neck. He dragged her to her feet and spun her around so he could see where her modest breasts hung freely in the chilly air. But her other arm was free. My reaction was on instinct, I rushed forward toward the two of them. I had forgotten I was an ethereal visitor from another place, from another time. I heard a puncture as I ran forward, and I came to a stop. I heard a wheeze from Sedrick, and his grip slackened. I looked down with him and saw something jabbed into his bare hairy chest. It was a peeling knife slipped under the ribcage. Then I looked up with him at the face of the girl standing in front of him.

A pair of indigo colored eyes, dull and without life to them stared up at him. I recognized those eyes immediately.

Sedrick released his grip on the girl and stumbled backwards a single step. He reached out with one hand to the puncture point. The knife had slipped through the fat and bone and likely tore his diaphragm and maybe clipped his lung. His attempts to wheeze and breathe told me that was likely the case. That did not stop the girl though. She didn't scream, she didn't make a sound. She didn't rage nor did her face contort in anger; it was a cold and emotionless expression. It was the same ruthless expression of the green clad assassin.

She didn't hesitate and slid the knife with another lightning quick strike that slipped through his right rib cage. I heard the sound of cutting meat, a puncture and flowing air. A punctured lung.

He stumbled backwards another step. His other hand tried to cover up the other wound. The first stab wound was already oozing blood and his hand couldn't press down hard enough to keep it in his torso. Soon, the other wound bled, and he coughed violently, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the floor and the girl with a knife. Minte didn't relent, she took a step forward and drove the peeling knife into his left

rib cage. Sedrick's eyes went wide, his face slackened and his body went stiff. He convulsed once, twice, then he didn't just stumble, his heavy body crumpled, and his back hit the floor cold hard cellar floor with a loud thud.

His weight caused the few candles sitting on the ground to jump up and fall over. The little lights that lit up the cellar spun around as they rolled all over the floor. Some of them extinguished. I could hardly see Minte now, I watched awestruck and afraid. But even then, the hook pulling at my brain didn't relent. It was now pulling at me harder than it ever had. Along with the knot in my gut that felt like a foreign bile churning in my stomach, I was suffering the worst migraine I had ever felt in my life.

But I ignored it and stayed right where I was. I was shocked, but not that afraid.

I lost track of the time and had no idea how long Minte stood there. She didn't plunge the knife into the body any more, she understood that he was dead. It was as if she harbored no more hatred against the lifeless corpse laying on the ground. It didn't strike me as the actions of a hysterical girl in a crime of passion. Eventually the door at the top of the stairs swung open. A girl came running down the stairs with a lit candle in her hands.

“Master Smould! Master Smould are you alright? I heard a noise!”

It was the homely girl from before, the one that tried to open up to Minte, who came running in. When she spotted the body on the floor, she stifled a scream with her hand and rushed to the body's side. The candlestick in her hand hit the floor when she dropped it in her panic. She dropped to her knees and held Sedrick's head up on her lap. Sedrick was unresponsive. Of course he would be. A ruptured diaphragm, a punctured lung, and to top it all off, a knife to the heart. His death would have only taken a handful of seconds. A few convulsions worth of time trying to come to terms with what was happened before he died.

It didn't take long for the girl to find the wounds and feel the warm blood seeping out from them. She was bawling softly, unable to comprehend what was going on. Finally, she looked beyond the body and spotted Minte who was looming nearby just on the fringes of what little light there was in the room.

“Mrs. Smould... Minte! It's Sedrick!... Mr. Smould. Mr. Smould is... He's dead!”

There was no window and the door was far away, but I still felt a cold wind blow. Minte's head slowly turned to look down at the maid. She looked her in the eyes for a moment, and that sickening feeling in my stomach intensified. I finally realized what it was. These were not

my memories, but someone else's. I had my own thoughts and emotions on what I was seeing, but that did not mean I was immune to the ambient emotion held within these memories. This sickening feeling in my stomach was but a taste of what was churning inside this girl. I watched her eyes move further down, then I looked where they led. Underneath the maid's apron, not so hidden when I see from this close up, was a noticeable bulge in her stomach.

"No." Minte said coldly, without emotion, like a machine. "Not. Completely."

Minte took one step forward out of the darkness. The girl looked a little harder through the tears in her eyes and no doubt saw the blood covering her and the knife her in hand. This wasn't a churning mass of jealous or envy I was feeling. This wasn't even simple anger. It was wrath. Pure unfiltered wrath. It reached the point where it was calm, not fiery. It drove the one afflicted by it to violence, cold and calculated violence without mercy.

The poor girl's eyes went wide with fright, and she screamed bloody murder. The shrill shriek jostled Minte from her stupor, the dullness of her eyes faded away, and for the first time in a long time, I saw emotion return to her face. The sickening feeling in my stomach vanished. She then noticed the knife she was clutching in her hand that was covered in fresh blood. The maid continued her long scream until she went light headed and fainted. Meanwhile, Minte's eyes flew back and forth inside her skull. She dropped the knife to the floor, her eyes welled up with tears and she ran. Minte grabbed hold of her town dress and covered herself and ran barefoot up the stairs.

When I was too far away from her, the world began to fall apart, so I slapped myself across the face to regain my own senses and rush after her. I climbed to the top of the stairs and looked left and right, just catching the girl going around the right corner. From the left corner, a parade of maids and groundskeepers woken from their slumber by the screams came running. I ignored them and gave chase to catch up with Minte.

There was only one destination at the end of the hallway I followed her to: The rear exit of the manor. I threw myself through the open door that led to the darkness outside. There was a snow storm raging and the snow was already about thirty centimeters deep. Dark storm clouds covered up a faint light from what I guessed was a full moon, but luckily, I could see far enough to spot the fresh footprints in the snow. She was only about thirty or so seconds ahead at most, even if it was dark, I wouldn't lose her if I ran.

So I gave chase. I felt the chill of the wind, snow and night in winter, but I was still just a ghost after-all. I was immune. But Minte wasn't. With that fear at the forefront of my thoughts, I continued to

follow the path of fresh bare footed prints in the virgin snow and I ran for what felt like half an hour. At last I came across a body in the snow, face down, but still trying to claw its way forward. I could only look on helplessly.

Eventually she stopped moving, and fresh snow began to pile up on her back and stay there because she could no longer slip out from under it. Her bare feet, hands, ears and nose had turned from their pale pink to a bright red and her body was shivering uncontrollably. Slowly, surely, she stopped moving. Whether it was because she couldn't, or she had given up, I didn't know. It was a surreal experience. I knew for certain it couldn't end here, but I still felt the crushing feeling of watching someone as they died. I hadn't even been able to properly process what had just happened back at the manor. I wouldn't get that chance.

The snow suddenly stopped. And it didn't just stop, it stopped in a very specific are of about twenty meters in all directions around the two of us. The wind was still blowing, less than before, and the clouds in the sky above us had cleared. A full moon I had suspected earlier was up there and illuminated the forest.

A forest of barren deciduous and evergreen trees grew side by side and between them were two of us; buried in the snow. The moonlight reflected off the snow and the whole area was almost bright as day for it. There was another sound beyond the howling wind though, it was another pair of footsteps crunching their way through the snow. When I looked up to see their source, I spotted a cloaked figure trudging through the trees in a straight path toward our location. It wasn't just rags either, it looked like a heavy parka made from furs. It fit over whomever it was like a robe. It hid away their identity completely.

I watched helpless to do anything as the fur clothed figure came to Minte who groggily stirred awake when the stranger knelt down in the snow beside the girl. A small, feminine hand brushed the snow off Minte's head gently. It slowly ruffled her hair, tentatively touched and caressed her frost bitten skin before finally pulling her hand back underneath her fur trimmed robe.

There was something unseeable pouring out from underneath those robes. I felt it in my gut. It was an oppressive aura, it had more power to it than anything I had ever felt. When she spoke, the words were haunting.

“You poor thing.”

Just the words were enough to have my heart skip a beat. They were just mundane words, spoken casually, but her voice carried the emotional impact of a choir. It wasn't terror that was gripping my body, it wasn't that kind of haunting presence, it was very soothing... calming.

That was the part that worried me. It wasn't natural. My better judgement told me it was manipulative.

The stranger reached her hands up to her cowl, slowly lifted it and threw it back behind her head. Cyan hair that sparkled and glittered under the moonlight like silver. Cut short in the back and curled outward horizontally from her neck about four centimeters, with long two thick forelocks that hung down from her ears and down to cover her chest. Her ears were long and knife-like, just like an elf's, but unlike an elf, there were also pair or sharp, large, black and thick demonic horns that curled from about the back of her head. They adorned her like a crown and the curled forward and hugged her head, ending only before her eyebrows. Her skin was pale, almost milky white and impossibly smooth and utterly unblemished. The curves and sculpture of her face... I almost fell in love at first sight, but a twitch in the back of my head snapped me back to my senses. She was impossibly beautiful and it almost caused my desires to take over my senses and my reason. It was if she was chiseled from marble by the greatest artist to ever live and he had succeeded in creating the absolute most beautiful woman that ever lived.

But all that beauty and radiance felt manipulative, and my mind rebelled against it. However, I could not refute that her beauty was beyond compare. Even the sincere expression of concern on her face seemed genuine even to my skeptical eyes. Yet, I couldn't shake that the woman's nature, even if she was unaware, manipulated the hearts of others. When she opened her eyes, I saw the red demonic eyes with pure white sclera. The iris of her eyes literally glowed a radiant red, as if they were burning embers that leaped from their surfaces.

Minte stirred under her gaze, but she was paralyzed by the cold and was shivering as her death neared. Her eyes that were half open, shot complete open in fright. I'm sure the same terror that gripped me was a hundred times worse for her. She was actually here, I was just a ghost. That enchanting aura had no grip on me, but she had no such immunity.

“What a cruel fate. The hand you were drawn, replaced with jokers by thieves and villains... Do not be afraid. I have not come to hurt you... Your cries of pain... I felt them.”

Not once had I heard Minte cry out. Not even once.

“Your heart... I heard it cry. I heard it break. Now, let me help you.”

Erupting from the demon's back, a pair of pure white bat-like wings, just like a succubus. Her tail which was tipped with a spade, slipped out from underneath the hem of her rob. It was also pure white. She reached out with her hand and brought it once again ever closer to the poor girl dying from hypothermia and frostbite. Minte shook and

shuddered in fear, but she was helpless to get away. As the arm got closer, it was soon covering by coiling misty tendrils of black and they each behaved like a tentacle with a will of its own. They acted exactly the same way as Professor Vee's abyssal energy did back in his laboratory in Domdracveria.

It was pure demonic energy.

"Do not be afraid. Do not despair. You have only come to the end of your beginning," The demon said, her voice smooth as ceiling wax.

When the finger tip of the demon gently touched the forehead of Minte, the tentacles of demonic energy flowed from her arms and onto the dying girl like live snakes. Three in all leaped from her arm and began to slither and coil around the girl's shivering body. From head to tail, they were each about two meters long, but they coiled round and round the girl's body as though their shape, size and length made no difference. Minte finally managed to whimper and thrash a bit in protest as the strange beings began to cover her. The demon did nothing to help, instead she watched with a gentle smile on her face. They wrapped around her breasts, coiled her legs and arms and teased her womanhood between her legs. Each moved sensually and soon her face flushed red not with frostbite, but because of pleasure as blood pumped through her veins and her body temperature rose.

"Let everything go. Let your troubles die within this forest. Do not give up on life. Life has been unfair, so I grant you this gift. The gift of life. New life."

Very soon, her body was not shivering because it was freezing and slowly dying, but because her body was being overwhelmed with pleasure. Minte's breathing became hot and heavy. The voice she seemed to have lost, let out moans of ecstasy. Moans she did her best to stifle because of the shame and disgust that overcame her. The demon shook her head in response to Minte's resistance. With a simple wave of her hand over the bound girl, the tentacles let out a black light and they doubled their efforts. The girl's back arced in just a few seconds, a sudden orgasm she could not fight back. It caused her body to go completely limp and that was when the demon's procedure entered the next stage.

She ignored the tears and protests from the girl. I then watched in horror as one of Minte's arms, that had been completely enveloped by the abyssal energy, melted. Every bone, muscle and cell within it melted into the tentacles that had bound her and now all three of them had merged together. She opened her eyes in fright when it happened. Her face was still flushed with pleasure and a trail of drool, unwiped from her chin. It was indicative that state of ecstasy had never left, even as she was beginning to dissolve. She looked like someone who

knew deep down she should be afraid, that she should panic and try to get away, but her body was already a prisoner of the pleasure it was receiving. Her eyes became unfocused, her mind was slowly going as well. One by one her other limbs melted into the mass of black that was enveloping her then it finally covered her whole body and then her head. She completely vanished underneath it all and it changed into the shape of a cocoon, an egg.

"Sleep for now. When you awaken, enter into a new world and seize happiness with your own hands. Your scars, they will wash away. Your affliction, it shall be undone. With your own hands, choose for yourself whom to share it with. Such will be your right. Take it by might if you so choose. Or..." The demon smiled gently, perhaps realizing her words would no longer be heard.

The demon stood up with a satisfied expression on her face. 'A job well done', is what it said. There wasn't an ounce of cruelty in her face. What had just occurred was the most benign thing she could have done, so she thought. And thus the cocoon remained. The demon pulled the cowl of her robe back over her head and stood back up. Her wings folded back and disappeared behind her back and under her robe, the tail withdrew and hid away. The unnatural break in the clouds closed up and the snow began to fall once more on top of the black sphere. Soon it was covered and hidden and the demon walked away back into the night. Without the light from the moon, I soon lost sight of her and I stood there over what I presumed was still Minte somewhere inside. But what little light there was all around me blacked out. It could not have been because of the lack of moonlight, with Minte vanishing with the abyssal energy, so did her perception of the world in her memories reach an end.

Time passed, I guess. I was immersed in darkness and when light finally began to return, the sun was bright and the sky was blue with only a few clouds. Leaves were budding on the trees and the snow melt was occurring. I looked down and I saw the cocoon that had not changed in what must have been months. But I had returned from the darkness for a reason. That reason was soon evident, because at last the cocoon began to erode and blow away as black dust. A million granules of black sand that were shiny enough to sparkle in the sunlight as the floated away and vanished. Slowly but surely, it revealed someone curled up inside.

It was the assassin, antenna, extra insectoid eyes, scythes, lower abdomen coming from her spine and all. She was curled in the fetal position and even the clothes she wore were the same; the skin tight body suit with the carapace armour as well. The yellow compound eyes went from a dull yellow to a bright yellow as though a membrane underneath the surface had opened as she stirred awake. Her eyes

opened and the indigo spheres saw the first light of spring. Their color though, they were dull, lifeless, just like when I first saw them. Minte, if she really was the same girl, pulled herself off the ground. At first pulled her body along the forest floor at a crawl until she ran into a tree trunk.

She didn't panic. She didn't react to anything that had happened or was happening. Neither did she even notice her metamorphosis. The mantis grabbed hold of the tree, pulled herself up and just walked. Her steps were unsteady at first, but she simply picked a direction and started walking.

The way she moved made her look like one of the walking dead.

The hook that had been pulling at my mind was long gone now. That stabbing path that had plagued me before she fled the house. It had been a constant companion for so long that now it felt wrong for it to be absent. But the world still fell apart when I strayed too far from her as she walked a straight line out of the forest. The tale had not ended yet, so I continued to follow her.

I followed her for what felt like hours, but the flickers and jumps in perceptive that followed told me that it might have been days of traversing the forest. The journey through the forest finally ended when she emerged from the treeline into farmers' fields and a small hamlet. She walked through the fields in broad daylight while the farmers were still working the fields. When they caught sight of her, they understandably dropped their tools, screamed, then scattered and fled. Minte did not seem the least bit bothered by it and didn't even notice uproar she had caused. She simply continued walking.

Her journey took her to the centre of the hamlet and to the local church. A quaint building, yet still the nicest building around. The star symbol of the Almighty hung in cast iron above the entrance. She pushed aside the mighty door and entered inside. An elderly priest who had been tending the alter turned to acknowledge his visitor, but he nearly fainted when the mantis entered. When she walked between the pews, he dropped to his knees and made shapes across his chest and face and muttered short prayers in desperation as she came closer and closer. When she was only a couple meters away from the priest and the alter, her knees finally gave out and she hit the floor face first. She passed out completely. Even the antenna atop of her head, which never ceased to move, held still. The priest was absolutely at a loss. Once again, my vision went dark as her memories entered another dark spot.

“She's a monster! We need to kill her now!” A voice shouted.

I was enveloped by the darkness once again, but voices came out from it one after another.

“Why did she come to the Church though. That isn't normal!” Another man's voice cried out.

“She's was after the priest.” A woman said. “They take away young and old!”

“Kill her. Kill her now before she wakes up!”

“No. Inform those at the cathedral. This is a strange case. He'll know what to do.” An elderly man's voice calmly said.

“Father... This thing was about to kill you... Or worse.”

“Any soul that enters this house and does no harm, is under my protection. Even if it's a monster.”

“Your crazy, you old coot! That's heresy, I'm sure of it.”

“At least tie her up!”

“What if that makes her angry?”

Worried murmurs came from all directions at once and then everything went silent again. Until I heard new voices. A little light shone through the darkness, but no more than a sliver in the distance, as though I was locked away in a shut closet.

“Well, I'll be damned. I found it hard to believe when you sent word a monster just waltzed into your parish and passed out...” An old man's voice said.

A younger man chipped in, “Yet here she is.”

“I thought it best to ask those higher up what to do. I am at a loss.” The same elderly man's voice said.

“For now, we'll take her back to the cathedral. This is a rare case, although not unheard of. Never seen a mantis do it though... Never seen a mantis outside the forest at all actually. So that's a first,” The old man said.

“We can keep her safely there. Then we can take her to the capital. I've heard that's where they've been sending these special cases.” The younger said.

The crack of light vanished, but the voices did not. Although they were all new this time.

“Father Ciel... Are you sure this is a wise idea.” A young man's voice quivered.

“Brother Ol'een, to win wars, you must be willing to take certain risks.” An older man's voice responded.

Suspended in the darkness were a hundred little screens. They were in every direction and each one a small snap shot of the world at large. They were above me and below me, all around me. It was as if I was looking through compound eyes. They must be how her other eyes see the world... Everything for three hundred and sixty degrees around and only tainted with a tinge of yellow.

“But Father, these are monsters. They prey on men, she could easily-”

“-Just as easily be made not to. You just need to push them in the right direction... If they come from certain places that is. This one was found wandering into a small rural church and passing out before the alter. I have seen cases like this before a dozen times and heard of dozens more.”

Two men dressed in clerical robes stood facing one another in some dark stone basement. The room was huge, candle lit with no windows. A single door was the only exit and the room had walls that were covered in full bookshelves. There were chairs and tables to read at, to sit to discuss the contents of those books, but there were also ominous stone slabs that looked more like surgery tables and chairs with restraints. There were even devices of torture scattered about the room.

“But never before a mantis. That is what has me worried, Father.”

“That is what has me so excited, Brother Ol'een.”

“How can you be so calm?”

Father Ciel, an aging man. Liver spots covering his body all over. His postured was hunched and he held himself up with a cane. He seemed more like a walking corpse than a man, but his eyes were still bright like a young man's. His robes were gold trimmed and adorned with symbols of office and rank, while his accomplices' was not but simple brown priest's robes. Brother Ol'een looked to be a man about sixty years the Father's junior. His hair was long, dark brown and his baby face was the very symbol of youth. They were the complete opposite of one another.

“Brother Ol'een. I did not refuse my place among the nine cardinals because I felt I was unworthy. I did so because I am committed to my research. As a bishop, I may not have as much power, but I have the freedom to do much more. The specifics of my research is something I trust few others with. But I know the cardinals desire what I know and are more than willing to support it with whatever resources I require.”

“Y-your research, Father Ciel?”

“Yes, one day you will replace me, so it is important that I pass on my knowledge... Turning the beasts of the Demon Lord against her.”

Brother Ol'een’s voice gasped in surprise.

“Out of all my students, you are by far the most pious and show the keenest intelligence. You alone have the potential to master what it is I must teach you before our lord, The Almighty, calls my soul to his side. All my life I have struggled for a way to fight back against the encroaching forces of darkness. Heroes are few and far between and even then, only groups of heroes working together can match the

monster warriors in combat. Only the most stout, strong willed and well trained can resist the charms, seduction and wiles of other monsters. Of all the monsters there are, how many such special and talented individuals exist among humanity? You need not be a soldier to understand that means."

"...Eventual defeat."

"Precisely. Unless we turn their own weapons against them, and quite the effective weapons they are, we are lost."

"B-but Father Ciel-"

"No more questions. Listen. There are three types of monsters: Those that come into existence spontaneously, those that are born from the union of man and monster... And human women who have become monsters. This specimen, is the last. Sometimes willing. Sometimes by accident... Sometimes not. By taking advantage of the latter... You push it into the right direction... Toward salvation. A chance to save their immortal soul. But for such a heinous beast, so full of sin... Great sacrifices must be made. For one such as this specimen. A mantis. An assassin of the forest."

"An assassin... You don't mean-"

"Right wrongs. Punish sinners. Pledge loyalty to humanity. When their times come at last, when they desire salvation, they will save their soul and enter not into oblivion, but to his side, The Almighty, in heaven. Separate them from sin. Keep them chaste, do not remind them of their licentious behavior under any circumstance. Make sure they know what fate lies for them should they not be saved... Lastly... Find their weakness."

They both went silent for almost half a minute. Until Ol'een suddenly changed the topic.

"I-I read the report..."

"...And?"

"An investigation did confirm her most likely previous identity. A Mrs. Minte Smould. Wanted for the murder of-"

"That is not important."

"F-f-father? If we know this, do not the families and local authorities deserve to know what-"

"Do not let the small picture blind you to the larger one, Brother Ol'een. I have read it as well... That is why I called you here. I am ready to begin, I know 'the key'."

"The key, Father?"

"A trigger. One we will use to keep her on a tight leash. Now. Make sure the restraints are steady and awaken her. It is a delicate process. A long process. But patience... Will be rewarded."

"Father... I don't know, this all seems-"

"Trust me, Brother Ol'een. I have not introduced you to them

yet, but I have already succeeded six times before. I am eager to finally complete my... collection. The conclusion to my lifelong project. The Arc Assassins. Not mere monsters in the service of the Church, no no no. The elite of the elite."

"I've heard the encroachment of monsters is not so aggressive as it was in your youth, Father Ciel... But what difference do these Arc Assassins have to monsters that now serve the church willingly in recent years?"

Ciel smiled at the boy, a different smile than the what a kindly old man usually shows a younger man; it was almost demented.

"Power. Absolute obedience."

"F-father?" Ol'een's voice quivered.

"You'll understand in due time, Brother. Our Lord wishes victory. We will do whatever it takes to achieve that. Lest this world succumb to chaos and ruin. Seven Arc Assassins there shall be, seven there shall always be. Should one fall, let her death give rise to their newest sister."

One by one the hundred little yellow screens turned off. They accelerated in how fast they vanished until once again there was nothing at all. Nothing, until the voices returned.

"Murderer."

"Sinner."

"Heretic."

"Traitor."

"Familicide."

"Monster."

The words repeated over and over again from every direction.

"No."

"Not."

"Completely."

Dozens of memories flashed before my eyes. I witnessed them all from the perspective of someone moving fast, fast and silent. I saw twin scythes on both arms cut through the air and ring metallically as they gracefully cut and severed. I saw monsters... and men. No. Not men, just a man. In a hundred different places, through spring, summer, fall and winter... over and over again, I saw the blades cut down Sedrick again and again. She cut her way through the monster at his side if she needed to. It was ruthless, it was efficient. All the while the sound of a hundred voices cried out those words again and again in my mind.

Assassination after assassination passed by, years went by... Decades. Until at last one place in particular stuck. It was yet another underground room. It looked like it was beneath yet another cathedral. It was not lit by candle, it was lit with nine black stone pillars that

floated in the air. Each glowed gold and runes crisscrossed every one, as though they were numbered in addition to the spell that had been placed upon them.

"A man has become a problem." One of the floating pillars spoke with the voice of a man.

"Eliminate him before he becomes a problem." Spoke another.

"Be cautious, he is guarded by powerful monsters." One spoke in a woman's voice.

A familiar voice answered them, "As you wish, your holiness." It was the cold and emotionless voice of Minte.

"You must bring an end to the man called, Laven."

"Not yet. Not completely, Green Reaper. Cleanse the world of the filth." The black slab in the centre said gravely to the assassin.

"As you wish, your holiness." Minte said again, a slight malicious growl in her voice as she saluted the inhuman monoliths.

I felt the churning pit of wrath in my stomach as she spoke.

One by one, the gold light from each faded. They turned from black to white then collapsed into small orbs of light that vanished completely. Then I felt a sudden and great pull backwards. As though I had come to the end of the line. I slipped backward through all the memories I had witnessed. Hours worth of memories lined a cylinder of time I fell backward into in under a minute. When I passed through the last of them, when I saw the bright, smiling and chipper Minte tear open the curtains to let the sun in, everything went dark.

That dark world was replaced with a colorless grey. I had returned to the closed world, the world where the sky was a town curled in on itself. A world where there were only two beings with color: Myself and a girl curled up with her knees tucked into cover her face. But now, the one sane building in a slew of others that were crooked and bent at impossible angles, was gone. A burnt out husk, a torched foundation. We were exposed to world. I spotted the girl, Minte, she didn't make a sound, but she was crying. Her eyes were open as the tears flowed, her eyes were wide, dull, colorless, lifeless. She was shell shocked and traumatized.

I was still reeling after everything I saw, but I still spoke. I tried to reach out to her.

"Did you try to hide that all away?... Or did you merely forget?"

She didn't respond. She was traumatized, severely. That hook trying to pull me back. It had to have been her. She had been desperate at every moment to stop me from revealing those memories. I ignored her and I brought every piece of dirty laundry and every skeleton out of the closet.

It broke her.

Chapter 63

The dreary winds of the closed world blew silently. Black birds with red eyes flew on those winds without even a single feather rustling. It was a place where everything was a twisted ghost from a time gone by. The ashes of what was once Minte's home swirled, kicked up into dust clouds and scattered to the four corners of the world. Amidst all the ash, I stood over the girl who was curled up on the floor. I watched her sit there, motionless... traumatized. What had been a cozy home and workshop was now obliterated. It was all my doing.

If everything here was a reflection of her heart, then my enterprising in her memories and pillaging them for information had consequences. In a moment of weakness, she had let me in. Try as she might, she could then not remove me. I was relentless, without mercy and stubborn to see it through till the end. One moment of considering my out stretched hand, and she had been robbed her of her home... Again.

If everything here was a metaphor, then this house where she hid away from the specters was her only sanctuary. At least it was. Every memory I witnessed forced her to remember them in turn. Each one was a painful memory; even the joyful ones. They reminded her of what she had lost. If this empty world was all she knew before, then knowing everything it lacked would make it tragic. I could sympathize with her. If all of that, any of it, had happened to me, I might have done the same. Maybe I was the same? My own memories are a patchwork. No journey into my heart would reveal anything. I had nothing that was hidden or painted over; everything had been cut out and disposed of. The mind is a resilient thing, so why mine was so heavily and irreparably damaged is the scary truth that I have to uncover.

But this isn't about me. Right now, I had to undo the damage I caused.

The two of us stood within the ruins for some time. I struggled to compartmentalize and understand everything I had seen, and the girl was incapable of doing anything. It was a vicious cycle because she couldn't tell me anything. It all happened so fast that I barely understood it. The short of it was this helpless and fragile girl before me was the girl who had pursued me all day and almost killed me several times. If she was allowed to wake up, she would finish the job immediately. She hurt Rose, Susan and Chris without hesitation. The girl had hurt and killed countless people and monsters before that.

Yet right now... All I could see was a fragile little girl. She looked broken, defeated, disconnected from reality. No... She had always been disconnected. Just now I had forced her back. Minte was

just a poor town girl. The eldest daughter of a cobbler of minor renown. She had no mother because she had died some time ago. She played the role of mother and older sister. This girl loved her family dearly. She loved it so much, she was willing to suffer to guarantee its safety.

But was that the way it had to be?

Maybe I ought'a send ya back home then? I can arrange that too.

I remember those ugly words from an ugly man.

I'll let you own this little place. No more rent. You'll also never have to worry about little Jerald's tuition ever again... I get my incessant son's whining out of my ear...

Ugly words from an ugly man's father. But something was amiss...

...and hopefully grandchildren before I die.

I said I wanted sons, but you can't even give me anything.

No. This didn't have to happen at all.

Show me that cute little smile of the little girl in the marketplace. The cute little smile I fell in love with.

"That ugly sack of shit." I hissed aloud. "The expensive wedding; staged as though money meant nothing. His father still having receipts for all that gold... He set it all up. There was no planned raising of the rent. It was all a ruse to get their hands on her... Because he couldn't keep it in his pants. There's no way he could have gotten the girl otherwise... The girl looked terrified at the mere mention of their names."

I clenched my fists tight and paced back and forth on the spot. My eye caught the attention of Minte who was looking up at me for the first time. Her eyes were still dead and empty, but she was watching me; her mouth slightly agape. I stopped and waked back toward her.

"Do you understand? You were deceived."

No. I don't think that really means anything. That day is gone and has been long forgotten. Why it happened seems irrelevant now. Her current state isn't caused by that. It was only the catalyst that started the whole sordid affair. An unfortunate beginning that means nothing by itself. For as cruel and callous an act it was... That wasn't even the real beginning.

Was it the abuse? All the physical, verbal, emotional and sexual abuse? I knelt down to look the girl in the eyes instead of looking down at her.

"He can't hurt you or anyone else anymore. You know that, don't you?"

She slowly looked away and refused to look me in the eyes.

"He wont stand trial, but he died a dog's death. He paid for his crimes; and if there is a hell, he'll be there."

My words meant nothing to her. They didn't reach her, nor stir her.

All those months being kept as a prisoner, they destroyed her innocence and her smiling face. Those days created a sad girl who did nothing but stare out the window in her place. I was looking at the same face even now. She was unable or still refused to communicate with me. If I could only know what it was that she was thinking, I could try to help her. I had to help her in order to help myself.

"I'm trying to help you," I said, struggling to maintain my composure

As my patience grew thin a pang of guilt started eating me up from the inside.

"I can't help you if you don't tell me where to start."

Still nothing.

"If I can't help you, we're both going to die. You're going to kill me, but you'd be sorely mistaken in thinking you'd get away with doing so afterwards."

Minte was still completely out of it.

This approach was going nowhere. I had to think harder. There was something I was still missing. A piece of the puzzle to get this all started. Something obvious...

The hook.

That hook. The feeling of something tugging at my mind. If I had been in her memories, and it had been trying to get me out... Then when it was pulling its hardest... Not just at the moment she killed Sedrick, but afterwards. When I felt that disgusting and revolting feeling in my stomach... Those few moments when her emotions were so strong that I actually felt it myself... The moment when she was about to kill the maid. A pregnant maid, the one that tried to be kind to her; that tried to be her friend.

Whatever. You just need to be a mother one way or another.

No, not completely.

No one was crying over Sedrick's death now. It made her a murderer, but what plagued her was that wrath. It almost led her to kill an innocent girl. Sedrick planned on having a child, a son, and it didn't matter where it came from. All that mattered was that people thought it was theirs. Minte would raise it as though it was her own. But when she almost turned her knife on the maid... It wasn't jealousy or envy that consumed her. What was consuming her wasn't just hatred either, it was wrath.

It blinded her, and she very nearly plunged that bloody knife into her stomach. She almost killed an innocent girl and unborn child. Only the maid's shriek snapped her out of it and allowed her to take a sober reflection on what she had just done and planned to do. A

feeling of wrath so powerful that it consumed her entirely, and she almost did not return. All to ensure that Sedrick was dead, even things half him.

It was a disgusting black mass which lumped in her stomach, and it made me sick to think about because when I did, I could feel it too. What would it feel like to have it weighing down on you? The guilt would have to be unbearable. I nearly vomited just after getting a small dose of it. The knowledge that you could be capable of such an ugly emotion would be a terrible burden. Especially for a sweet girl who once had such a pretty and genuine smile. She wasn't a killer. Not at heart. Killers with twisted hearts like that are made, not born.

After that she ran, and then she met that demon in the forest. The winter cold almost killed her, no, it did kill her. If that demon had not appeared, she would have died for certain. It then cast a spell over her, and it transformed her from a frail human girl into a ferocious monster. She slept till spring and reawakened as the mantis girl, the assassin I met in the dawn. The mantis who wore the same face as Minte when she struck down Sedrick.

What the girl had done before was certainly a crime, but I would dare anyone to claim she could not be forgiven for doing it. What she almost did was unforgivable, but she didn't do it. She regained her senses and stopped. The only unforgivable thing that had occurred was her brainwashing. They found her and took her in. When she was scared, confused and desperate they twisted her guilt and turned it against herself. The Church took her trauma and abused it further. I remember seeing how she looked at all those victims. Each and everyone of them was Sedrick. If it wasn't Sedrick, they made her believe it was his child. A child wore his father's face, an ugly and cruel face that would torment her further. It was an unforgivable act. That is probably why I am dealing with this girl as she is right now. She is a mental and emotional wreck because she is easier to control that way.

I might have broken her when I forced her to face her past. But I will not build her back together. No, I am not those villains. Even if my life depends on it... I will never do that... She'll have to face herself. She'll have to face her demons.

“Minte,” I gently called out to her.

I said it so sincerely, that even she could not look away and she slowly but surely looked at me once again.

“I know they hurt you. They messed you up, but I'm here to help. I can help you undo the damage, but you're going to have to do that yourself.”

She was listening.

“They wanted a weapon. They never wanted to save you. What happened to you is something you can't be saved from. You

need to know that; you have to accept that. It will be painful, but only you can deal with your demons. What happened to you was not a punishment. You were given a second chance at life. You may not have wanted it, but you mustn't let go of that. Don't let anyone else take control it if for their own purposes. Not the church so they can continue to harm others. Not even me. Because I'll be honest, I just don't want to die."

Her dead face changed for the first time, but it was a look of confusion. Not at the words that were coming out of my mouth... No, something more fundamental than that. But what could- No...

"You... Do know I'm talking about, don't you?"

She didn't nod or shake her head, she just continued to stare at me, her head titled slightly to the right.

"You don't know what I'm talking about... The forest, the walking, the church and the priests-"

Her head tilted even more... That's what I feared.

At first.

A piercing screech howled and bounced around the sealed world. There wasn't a single other sound to compete with, so it amplified and echoed to a deafening decibel. It hit the walls that were town and the ceiling above that was the town. It was a familiar screech. It chilled me to my bones, and I heard the first sound of the girl; she whimpered in terror.

All around the two of us, the black shades clawed out from the shadows. They were black human yet featureless bodies with glowing red eyes. They marched down the street, they climbed over the roof tops and they crawled like spiders over the walls. A hundred, and maybe more, converged on the burnt out rubble of her home. Every pair of eyes was glued to us. We were exposed, the solid walls of the solitary sane house amidst the twisted madness no longer hid the two of us, and the other denizens of this place found us.

"...Shit," I said with trembling nerves.

***

The wyvern lets out a mighty roar as her right talon swings upwards into the air and drops down in an axe kick. Her speed, power and weight behind the kick causes a ripple in the air pressure and the sharpness of her talons obliterates everything in its path. Even the ground beneath her heel is not safe, and soil explodes in all directions. A lithe cat girl back flips backwards, head over paws, twice and dodges the attack while the elf notches another arrow to her bow and lets it fly. It's on target, but it doesn't strike true. It strikes the wyvern's shoulder and leaves behind a gash while the arrowhead harmlessly glances off. It fails to pierce her armor like skin, much like the arrow before that. This stalemate battle has been carrying on for some time

now. Christophaclies, the wyvern, is not fast enough to catch her opponents. The catgirl and elf who hounded her is not able to pierce her defenses.

A game of cat and mouse plays out between all three of them. The elf and cat runs circles around the lumbering giant between them. A handful of arrows protrude from the wyvern's back and shoulder along with a couple throwing knives embedded in her thighs, but all they show is the paltry progress they had made. In order to stay out of Christophaclies' path, they are quickly exhausting themselves. Meanwhile, the wyvern is indomitable. She does not slow down, she does not show pain and she most definitely does not show cowardice. After yet another arrow deflects harmlessly off her armor while the elf's bow string quivers. The two henchmen of Zerin leap backwards to regroup.

Their opponent did not let the two of them rest for long. The wyvern pursues.

“My scales are not of flesh and bone but of justice incarnate!” She bellows. “Your cowardly attacks mean nothing, agents of darkness!”

Her taunts agitate both of them. The two henchmen grit their teeth and suffer through the humiliation because they have so far failed to even slow the wyvern down. Some would think the wyvern speaks like an actor on the stage, purposely mocking her opponents with laden sarcasm, but they would be misguided. Christophaclies believes each word coming from her lips as fact.

The elf and cat exchanges a series of gestures, holding a short but detail packed conversation with just a few sweeps of their hands. They suddenly split and circle around the wyvern in opposite directions to split her attention. It is possibly a fatal maneuver. They would not be able to support one another fast enough if the wyvern got one of them in her clutches. They doubted either could harm her till she let the other go if one was caught.

The feline sprints across the ground on all fours, legs between her outstretched paws, a tail that counter balances her sudden shifts in direction. Another arrow notches against the elf's ancient bow, but the elf holds her fire until she reaches the wyvern's left side. The she-elf lets fly a single arrow at the wyvern's head, but it is a futile exercise, the wyvern only need raise her wing, and it deflects harmlessly away. Just as they both expected she would.

A divot of mud and leaves is flung into the air as the cat-girl kicks off the ground and makes a sudden ninety degree twist toward Christophaclies. She kicks off the ground a second time just as the arrow hits the hard scales and leather of the left wing, raising her knee upwards as she rises. The wyvern is quick, the blow does not land, but

the feline's light body carries her upwards, and her other paw kicks off the wounded wing within the splint. A faint crunch is heard as the soft pad of her paw presses the cat's entire weight on the fractured arm. The wyvern's seethes of pain are heard well above that.

Yet another arrow is notched and readied with rapid precision and the momentarily stunned wyvern is struck with an arrow. It strikes true on the back of her knee and it sticks halfway through the weaker armor, the human skin just above the dragon scales. The feline twists in mid flight and pincers her knees around the wyvern’s neck and lands on her shoulders. Razor sharp claws extend from her paws and she beats upon the horned head of the wyvern in a flurry of blows. Scratch after scratch leaves lines of red on Christophaclies' head as the feline hisses.

The wyvern seems through, but her tail snaps upward and slips between one of the cat's legs. It curls around one leg holding the cat tight against her head before the feline is aware. Stingy muscles on a cat are no match for the ones just within that tail, so with a flick the cat is swiped away like a fly behind a horse's ass. But a cat always lands on its feet, and as such, lands unhurt several meters away. The elf and cat quickly regroup to plan their next move, but they stop when they realize the wyvern is still standing tall.

Christophaclies over extends her knee slightly, and the arrow pops loose. There is a minor wound that bleeds out, but the ligaments and cartilage of the knee are undamaged. A hundred scratch and paper cuts crisscross her head and face, but her will is no less than it was before. Instead, she looks furious.

“...Dirty fighting...” She growls lowly.

The cat and elf smirk and open their mouths to taunt the naïve dragonkin, but they are quickly muted.

“How dare you get your muddy paws on it!”

On Christophaclies’ splint, there now exists one single muddy paw print from the cat and it is enough of a spark to light a fire behind her eyes. Her opponents are taken aback and momentarily dumbfounded while the wyvern huffs and puffs.

There is only one reason a dragonkin does that.

Christophaclies' cheeks puff out, and a torrent of liquid fire cascades onto the battlefield. The elf and cat only just barely come to their senses quick enough to dodge; mistakenly in the same direction. A stream of fire rakes across the forest floor behind them. As she finally runs out of breath, the last burst from Christophaclies mouth explodes behind them. The cat and elf escape the blazing inferno, but just barely. The elf is forced to tear off and discard her cape that was lit on fire and soon crumbles into ash. But neither are given a chance to catch their breaths. They leap away in opposite directions as a roaring

wyvern jumps into the air and slams her knee onto the ground between them.

While the dragon's tail spins and swipes, and the two agile fighters duck and leap over it, the inquisitor busies himself with his blood letting. The wyvern chases the mice and the mice try to be rats, so that they might scrap with the cat while the inquisitor tortures an unconscious Laven. Zerin paces around the anubis who clenches her paws and bites down on her lip, the temptation to rage at the man for harming her Pharaoh so incredulously rising by the second.

With a snake's venom in his words, he presses in on Shoshanah, “Just how severe a crime was it to trample upon the laws you are sworn to uphold in order to have saved your 'Pharaoh’s' life?”

The anubis averts her eyes and looks downward, shocked. Her eyebrows and lips tremble. Her mind reels as she cannot understand how the madman could have asked such a question. A question too close to home, and what it implies, is too true.

“Alice's final spell was a masterpiece.” The inquisitor recollected fondly, “Regrettably a promising talent was snuffed out at such a young age, but to exterminate the both you from this world... I would say it was a fair risk to take.”

Shoshanah's disgust grows more profound by the moment as she listens to the callous disregard for life coming from Zerin's mouth. But her mind races to piece together a rebuttal; and thus, the man continues, uninterrupted.

“I saw it strike 'him' down. I saw as it tore through his chest, a blinding light which could rival that borne of heaven!” His voice becoming more sedated as he continues, “Yet even though it tore his lifeforce apart, I see him alive, unscarred... A boiled egg can never become a hen. Lifeforce burnt away like that does not recover. No... No, it was replaced.”

Shoshanah's claws dig into her thighs as Zerin inches closer and closer, his words becoming more and more incriminating.

“And here I thought the anubi, guardians of the dead, judges of the hearts of men, did not meddle with the natural order. They don't, do they?”

She refuses to look up at Zerin, but that didn't bother him. He refuses to touch her, but he still leans in further and further as he applies more pressure upon the girl with his words.

“Dare I assume? There is even a law prohibiting that. What would happen to a poor misguided judge who did such a thing? How would a jury of her peers pass judgement? That would depend... Is it among the worst of crimes she can commit?”

His tone switches, a bipolar flip. His voice became jovial while he turns on his heels, walking away from the anubis, and he paces

back and forth in front of her.

“Someone who guarded a tomb for someone who died long, long ago. He died such a cruel death. A promising life cut short by those he trusted most. Yet even then, despite all her devotion and loyalty to her duty to protect him...” Zerin's voice becomes pointed while he rushes back to glare down at the girl “She. Did. Nothing.”

Zerin can not see the look on Shoshanah's face. It is contorting as though she has been stabbed in the stomach, but his senses and intuition are keen. He can feel it. All his research and investigation along with his prodding has identified the weakness he was looking for. He continues to pour his venomous words inside. Each of them is true and the anubis can say nothing.

“Why? Why would she do that? Perhaps she never thought about it. Which is odd, because she's a smart girl. A very smart girl. So unlike all the others. She is perceptive. Dare I say: self 'aware'? No. She knows. She knows full well, but she hides it. She buries it deep down inside. Telling no one. Not. Even. 'Him'.”

The inquisitor squats down in front of Shoshanah so that he might look her straight in the eyes when he speaks next, but the girl still refuses to meet his gaze. It doesn't bother him in the least. He knows she is listening. He can feel it.

“So why?...” He did not receive an answer, so he continues, “Do you want to know what I think?... It is because this world has been twisted. Two hundred years ago it was twisted beyond recognition. Whole chapters detailing, in all its glory, The Almighty's great plan for us all, were torn out and incinerated in a demon's pyre. A demon whore upset the natural order. Monsters: beasts of death and destruction, transformed into beasts of lust and beauty, as if overnight... But they are still just as ugly on the inside!” He screamed. “Just look at you, you pitiable dog! So much pride, so much respect for the law, brought so low. A bitch in heat, your reason corrupted. Tainted! Your principles undermined. Order... reduced to chaos. You were never meant to meddle with the living. Yet you prevented one man from passing into death. Why? Out of duty? HA! No, you did no such thing, not in the past, not then and not now. Your mind has been poisoned. Poisoned by a poor duplicate. A copy of something made by a creature that could never understand it. A whore borne of hell, who has never and will never know God.”

His lips curl and twist into a sinister face that could scare even the dead.

“Love. A poor imitation of it dreamed up by the whore. Not even a shadow, but a mockery. A demon whore that could never imagine the love of God and only knows the carnal lust of beasts. And she misdirects it. At. Men. But you already know this, don't you? It

pains you, doesn't it? You feel a faint warmth in your heart, but you are crippled by the guilt and fear of it all. Well, let me put your concerns to rest."

Zerin leans in even closer, close enough that the stench of his breath wisps past the jackal ears atop the girl's head.

"It's. Not. Real."

He leans back again, but the girl still refuses to look up at him. She is frozen in place, almost shaking now, with her claws almost drawing blood from her thighs.

"Free yourself," He says softly. "Let it go. Be brave and renounce your dead gods. I know your smart enough to figure it all out. I know that you have already come to the truth. You've thought about it many a time before, but you dismissed it because your head is confused. Poisoned by a force you cannot control: The whims of the demon whore whispering in your ear. Let it go and free yourself... As others have." Zerin says, as he waves and points his hand in the direction of his henchmen. "Let go of your earthly desires, accept the only love, from our Lord God, The Almighty"

Zerin's creepy smile returns to his face while the anubis shudders and shakes, still refusing to meet his gaze

***

The black shades that crawled out from the shadows surround the ruined home like an angry mob now. Their glowing red eyes, all of them, are fixated on the trembling little girl before me. I wasn't faring better. Even though not a single glare was directed toward me, my knees felt weak. They stood around the home, hundreds of them, but they just stood there and stared. There wasn't a single sound, they stared in eerie silence. I did not know what they were waiting for.

More shades emerged from the dark recesses of the town, and they all gathered at the fringes of the mob. As time went on, their numbers quickly swelled. When I looked up into the sky, I saw the opposite side of the town above me and there I spotted what looked like ants marching down the crooked streets. Streets that wound through the town, the walls, which were more curved town and were more like mountains. Soon those ants would merge with the mob that was surrounding the two of us. Their numbers would be in the thousands.

It all reminded me of a classic nightmare scenario... Only I wasn't waking up in the nick of time, was I?

They didn't seem to be that intelligent, and I wasn't talking about mob mentality, because there was nothing blocking them from approaching, yet they were just standing and waiting for what was a minute now. But just like mob rule, as soon as one stepped up to the foundation, others followed suit. Only a few seconds later and there

were dozens closing in from all directions on the two of us.

Their red eyes burned like two pieces of lit coal. They had no skin, they were all pitch black, humanoid, but their surface was smooth and flat. Instead of skin, they appeared to be made of glass, black like obsidian. There was not a mouth between any of them, but I soon heard whispers. A thousand faint whispers in unison. Something was being mumbled on the stale wind.

I looked back at Minte, and her eyes were wide with fright. Her hands were clamping down on her ears, and she was breathing heavily. A very faint begging escaped her lips.

"No. Please no. Stop. No."

I couldn't hear anything; but from her reaction, she heard their chorus clear as day. There was no way for me to guess what it was they were saying, until Minte began to break down.

"I didn't mean it. I didn't want to. Please, no. Leave me alone." She mumbled to herself, trying to make herself small as possible.

Her pleading did not reach the ears of mob. The shades didn't even have ears. They marched slowly, one painfully slow step at a time. They were only just out of arms reach of me now, but they were already forming a break in their line to walk around me. It felt like it was only a couple hours ago that they hounded me with murderous intent. Now they were ignoring me. It was as if I was nothing more than a stray pillar sticking out from the ruined foundation.

Every step they got closer to the girl, the deader her eyes appeared. The closer they got, the more defeated and lethargic she became. Finally, her hands fell from her ears and her body relaxed. It was as if... she was accepting the inevitable. Life was leaving her. No. Not life, but the will to live. As the whispers got louder, I finally understood. In the final moments, I could pick out some chants.

Murderer. Sinner. Heretic. Traitor.

I'm not usually one to believe in such nonsense, but I was suddenly hit with a prophetic vision. It was as if the world was showing me its intentions as the mob was about to walk past me.

Despair. Helplessness. Guilt. Judgement... The End.

Those words flashed in my mind's eye. Unannounced. Every line of thought went to the same place. Perhaps they were guided to the same place. Soul crushing despair. The End. But this was inside her own mind... suicide.

A thousand man mob of shades descended on her, crushing her will and her life. What would happen if they reached her? An image, instead of words, flashed before my mind's eye: Death. Turning her own hands against herself. The End. An end to pain and guilt. I imagined the assassin pulling back her blades and turning them on

herself. It would be... The End. Whatever happened here, I would wake up later. I would then be either dead on arrival, or not. This was one way, wasn't it?

I looked down at the girl; she looked dead. She was pale, her eyes were still open, but they were half closed. It was if she was about to fall asleep. She had looked as though she was on the verge of going mad just a moment ago, but now... Would this nightmare, mean the end of mine?

An image flashed before me eyes. It arose naturally, it was not imposed upon me.

A beautiful smiling girl. She looked very much- was... Minte.

The mob stopped and formed a semi circle around the girl. On my left and my right stood two of the shades. One more stood behind me, and it appears as though they had split just to give me my front row seat I had long since reserved. On the opposite side of the circle, one shade stepped forward. Its red eyes looked down at the girl, all the others watched the shade. It slowly reached out with one hand to lay upon the top of the girl's head... I just now noticed fresh tears pouring down her face. It was in such sharp contrast to the image of her-

"God dammit... I'm going to regret this."

Famous last words. I recall having said them before.

I stormed out from mob. I couldn't accept it. I wouldn't accept it. I'd regret not accepting it, but I'd hate myself if I did. I felt a nine hundred and ninety-nine eyes turn my way and I started regretting it immediately. But I didn't stop. I marched over to the lone shade, and with all my might, shoved it away from the girl. It didn't hear me coming and it certainly didn't see me coming. I was expecting something worse, because when I shoved it aside, it lost its balance and fell over into the crowd. It knocked over about four others, like bowling pins.

There was a shriek. It was such a horrible, loud and ugly banshee-like shriek. Like nails on a chalkboard and a screeching violin amplified to eleven. My ears felt moist because of it, I wouldn't be surprised if it was blood, and both my ear drums had been ruptured. I covered my ears on instinct, but that only made it easier when I turned around and one of the other shades was already in my face. Its elbows were cocked back and its hand shot out like daggers. Its palms joined, and a spearhead stabbed into the centre of my chest.

It didn't hurt at all, it moved like a ghost. I felt an icy touch, but my muscles, organs and bones didn't snap or break to make room as they plunged into my chest. Then I felt a pressure on my heart. The spear head opened up at the last moment and two icy hands had it in its grasp. My heart that had been pounding just a second ago, was now almost dead still. I gasped as I took in a quick breath of air in surprise and my body shook as if taken by a sudden chill. I found

myself staring into the sizzling ember eyes of the shade. It had no other features, otherwise, its shadow could pass for a human silhouette.

My mind raced, but my body was slow, lethargic and- tired...

Tried of all this. Running. Hiding. Being bossed and pulled around. I just wanted to go home. There was a bed I wanted to wake up in. I've only caused trouble. Nothing but trouble ever since I woke up. How many lives have I ruined? How many will be ruined before I am done? Before I am satisfied? What right do I have to keep doing all that, just so I can go home? I was caught in a bad dream, right? This crazy world, it couldn't be real. Magic. Monsters... Monsters that were all women. It wasn't home, it wasn't real. It would be better if I just woke up now, before I hurt anyone else. I remember now. If I just... lean my head forward. Its just one way to wake up from this- NO!

My eyes shot open suddenly. I caught myself not breathing and I greedily sucked in air through my nose. I heaved while the cold feeling spread throughout my body. From the point the hands had stabbed into my chest, black veins were crawling just under my skin from the point of entry. They spread down my arms and legs and they were making their way toward my neck and head. I caught myself thinking forced thoughts. Ugly thoughts. They pissed me off, but I understand what's going on now... I understand well enough. I now comprehend the emotions and feelings plaguing this poor girl.

“Crystallized... Despair...” I groaned at the shade. “...That's what... she... was hiding from.”

My hands, that were dangling limply at my sides, slowly, shakily, rose up and my hands seized the arms attached to the hands grasping my heart. Black veins, something foreign, flowed in from the shade's arm and into my hands. They slithered and worked their way up. Toward the veins that were already working down. They soon mingled and met, and I felt the cold slimy tentacles work their way up the arteries in my neck.

“Don't... Think I'm... That stupid,” I growled. “It doesn't matter what I think... Alone... I'm only here, because... Others trust me. Rely on... Me. Expect things... from... me!”

I gripped tighter. I could feel the cold glass like texture of the shade's arm, the cold that was spreading throughout my body.

“You hear that? Minte! You don't think... Anyone cares?” I shouted to the girl behind me while I tried to turn my head to look at her. “I can't... Save you... But I can... Show you... HOW!”

I didn't get a chance to look her in the eyes, if she was looking. My neck felt like it was made of ice and it snapped back forward as though it was made of frozen rubber that refused to stretch. The worst case scenario: it would break. This was all a dream. It took place

inside someone's heart and right now, I was one too. I understood that now. There was no way I was going to let a little thing like these shades get in the way.

I grit my teeth and started to push the arms back. I hissed and mucus gurgled in the back of my throat as my muscles bulged and strained. Slowly, a centimetre a second, the shade's arms gave way. Its icy fingers were slipping off my heart and the tendrils of cold spreading through my veins stopped and started slithering back in the other direction. I felt a brief moment of resistance, as though hitting a brick wall, but I just put more into it, broke through, and started moving again.

I heard a sound akin to shattering glass. I looked the shade straight in its 'face' and a fracture was forming across the lower part of its head. A jagged and uneven fracture. Eventually the lower half of it lowered like an opening maw, a maw made up of several jagged and pointy teeth that were like shards of broken glass. Beyond the black exterior, was a bright crimson red glow that radiated out from inside its body. It let out one last snap, then the jaw moved freely, unhinged likes snakes, and the head lunged forward only about twenty centimetres from my face. It howled a piecing shriek at me. I took a deep breath, a very deep breath, and I roared at it in turn. My voice carried louder than I would have ever given it credit for. It drowned out its shriek with ease.

It didn't take long until I had pulled its arms back enough that only its fingertips remained in my chest. The icy black tendrils had also pulled back to just around my sternum and had been completely repelled from my arms and hands. I continued to roar while it shrieked at me in return until I finally pushed its arms from my body completely. Then I pulled its arms apart and yanked them forwards. At the same time, I threw my knee up into his abdomen where I slammed into it with the sound of cracking glass. Its body stopped, but not its arms; the shade's arms cracked, crinkled and snapped off at the sockets, and the shade's next sheik was one of pain. It dropped to the ground on its knees and I swung my right arm, with its arm still in my firm grip, I took a step backward then swung it down on its head. The hollow glass-like arm shattered into pieces on impact, but so did its head which was obliterated.

The shade's headless and armless body slammed into the ground, and there it shattered into a million pieces, like grains of sand. Grains of sand that then evaporated into mist and diffused, or disappeared, into the air. I let go of the arm in my left hand, and it likewise shattered on the ground, disintegrated and vanished in the same way. My breathing was heavy while I slowly spun around on the spot and surveyed the hundreds of eyes still staring at me. Not a single

one had so much as lifted a finger all that time.

Minte was still kneeling on the ground behind me unmolested. I flashed a quick smile and wink. She seemed to jump up off the ground a couple centimetres. She was alright, for now, so I turned my attention back to the horde of other shades.

“Is that all you got?” I yelled triumphantly.

An explosion. Something bulldozed through a nearby crooked house and sent stone, timber and glass in every direction like shrapnel. A couple dozen shades were caught in the wave of destruction, the rest lazily turned their eyes away from me and toward the rising dust cloud.

Emerging from the cloud, was a giant two story tall monster. A giant black mantis creature thundering its way forward on four legs and two giant scythe arms folded in front of it. The antenna whisked and twirled above its head and its neck made sudden choppy movements as its red burning eyes scanned its surroundings. A pair of mandibles clicking and clattering together with a trail of clear drool oozing from its mouth.

“That's... Not all you got...” I said, slowly deflating.

***

The inquisitor's eyes are wide open, rabid, as he stares down the anubis. He is nearly salivating at the jackal squirming under his gaze. His keen senses and reading the emotions and tells of others titillating him as he watches Shoshanah.

“That's just the way you monsters are,” He says, barely able to contain his excitement as he preaches. “Just misguided pawns of the demon whore. Every belief and value you once held dear, gone. Every one of them an inconvenience in her designs. What you are, what you were, has been tainted. So I implore you, let it go. That turmoil you suffer through will be done away with it. All you need do is take back what you gave. I will then do the rest and you shall be free. Your peers need not know.”

Zerin leans close yet again and whispers into her ear. An ear that twitches as the white tufts of fur reacts to his foul breath.

“It can be our wittle secret.” He says, as though talking to a baby.

Very suddenly, the jackal lets her paws relax and her body stops shaking.

“Heh,” the anubis snorts, her shoulders shaking once more, but in weak amusement.

The smile on Zerin's face wipes away slowly.

“I believe, that the man doth project too much,” She says, stifling a laugh before she continues. “Inquisitor Zerin... You think your

interpretation of how the world functions is irreproachable, yet you have only observed it through a single spectrum for the entirety of your fleeting existence..."

Shoshanah's voice becomes serious; her head still bowing low, her eyes still fixed on the ground.

"...Hatred... For all your proselytizing, Zerin, your heart is no less black than when you began. Dare I say? You are the single least qualified individual in existence to speak on matters of the heart... For all your bravado and self propagandizing of your 'genius insight' into the hearts and minds of others... I find my exact sentiments toward you are in unanimous consensus with someone who is currently unable to speak for himself."

Zerin's face quickly becomes a frown.

"Therefore, I feel obligated to bequeath these brusque words onto you. Not only for him, but for myself, when I say:"

Shoshanah slowly lifts her head and with furrowed brows stares right at Zerin. Her red eyes burn bright and full of determination and defiance.

"Fuck you."

The meaning of the foreign word is lost on the inquisitor, but not the tone and expression in which the anubis spoke to him. Zerin's frown turns immediately into a furious and rabid scowl. He rises to his feet and almost strikes her, but he controls himself just barely. He still understands that she needs to be alive, and to a point, untouched or else the spell binding 'him' may break and his query would be lost.

"Vengeance WILL be mine!" He screams.

He turns on his heels and allows another stiletto knife from his sleeve to slide into his waiting hand. Zerin faces Laven once again, marches forward, his blood boiling. He walks past the kneeling assassin.

"A tooth for a tooth!"

The Inquisitor, armed with a knife in his right hand, pulls his elbow back and takes aim.

"An eye for an eye!"

The knife surges forward, propelled by the arm and hand in tow. It meets no resistance.

***

I crane my neck up, so that I might fully witness the immense size of the monster that had just barrelled into the scene. My instincts tell me two things: As metaphysical as this all is, this is a bit too much for to handle, and I'm going to have to stop jinxing myself. The monster has the same external makeup as the shades, the only difference is the insectoid shape instead of humanoid, and of course, the size. Its arrival spelled certain doom. Until it started moving again.

Faster than my eye could see, one of its forearms came slamming into the ground in front of it. Grey cobblestone and dust along with black glass and mist were tossed up into the air. A dozen then a hundred shrieks and cries from the shades competed with the further cacophony of crashed stone and breaking glass. Not a single shade remained still. For a mob that had been moving in unison, as if of one mind, just as suddenly broke into chaos. They fled away from the circle around Minte and me and rushed to be the first to vanish into the dark corners and shadows. Those that were not fast enough were soon cleaved by the massive sharp and spiny scythes of the giant mantis. I saw one of its pincers grab one of the shades and bring it to its mandibles. Its head was torn clean off and crushed to a fine powder in its mouth.

I backed up next to Minte; we seemed to be equally surprised at the rampage that was going on before us. It didn't take any longer than a minute until the area around the destroyed house had been cleared out by the beast; then it turned its attention toward us, with its two ridiculously large and red compound eyes. However, I didn't feel the need to run. The feeling wasn't mutual with the girl at my feet though. With the shades and the despair, they brought with them gone, she was now back to panicking. She was clinging to my legs and on the verge of screaming... No, she was... pushing me?

The mantis rumbled closer and closer until its front legs stopped just before the ruined foundation. Meanwhile, Minte was trying to get me to flee. Her voice was soft, hoarse, dry and lost, but she still tried as she wept.

I didn't back up or run away. I stepped forward against her prodding and pulled myself free from her grip. I approached the monster. If it was going to attack, I'd be dead in an instant when I got within range of those scythes. One simple motion, like a finger crushing a bug from above, and I'd be split in half or simply crushed. I didn't fear either possible scenario. Things were coming together in my head and if I was right... I walked right up the monster, now well within strike distance. The mantis made no move, but its eyes were certainly watching me.

“Minte...” I said cautiously.

I looked behind me and saw I had the girl's attention once again.

“Not you.” I said.

The girl's eyes went wide with bewilderment.

“Yeah. That's right,” I said, so she wouldn't mistake what I was about to tell her. “This...” I said while waving my hand in front of me. “Is YOU.... Part of you,” I clarified. “That's why I'm not afraid of it lashing out. You don't actually want to hurt anyone, do you? You never

did. Even the worst scum of the world you had every right to."

I reached up and put my hand on the smooth glass-like surface of the mantis' forearm, the sharp pointed tip of its left scythe. It didn't react.

"You didn't want to remember that feeling. That knot in your gut. It made you feel as though you could hate everyone and everything... Enough to kill. You could associate your suffering, your destroyed life and dreams... with anyone. You'd be able to kill... Anyone, with impunity... Even your own family. It wouldn't be that big a stretch to blame them for pushing you away... For not stopping you. Not fighting or sharing the burden for you."

I lowered my arm and turned around to face Minte again. She was still wearing the same dumbstruck expression on her face, but she was listening. Maybe she just couldn't see me with how red and water logged her eyes were, they were completely unfocused.

"You panicked after you realized what you did... and almost did. Understandable. But it was cold outside. Snowing. You would have cooled off and realized what you were doing eventually... Here in this little town, now inside your head, this was your whole world. But it got twisted beyond recognition. It was supposed to be a safe place for you to escape to. But you couldn't get away from your guilt. You kept running into those woods... You didn't turn back to be arrested. You didn't run home. You wanted to get away... and survive. Even if you felt you didn't deserve either. In the end, you thought it best to save others from yourself and keep running even if it killed you. And it did. But it didn't end there."

I started walking toward Minte as I spoke. She didn't push me away, she didn't try to crawl away and she didn't scream bloody murder. She was paying attention to my every word.

"You became a monster. Not by choice. It was forced upon you in order to save your life. You became... this," I waved again to the mantis, still on standby. "I don't know how these things work. Maybe the white demon woman had a dark sense of humour or its poetic justice?... But in the end, that's what happened. That's the part you don't remember, right?"

She started shaking again and clutching her head as I got closer.

"Now you remember. Only the mantis over there woke up. But you didn't. You stayed in here. The mantis wandered through the forest, with a mind like a newborn. She was lost, confused... eventually she stumbled into another town. It had pieces of your memories to figure things out, so it went for the church right away... For help. But the church was instead gifted with a weapon. An impressionable and malleable monster... A potentially dangerous killing machine. They

figured out it was you inside, so they used that moment with Selkirk... And... And brainwashed the mantis into believing it wasn't done protecting 'you'. You were still inside here, pushing everything away. Selkirk most of all, and this other 'you' did everything in its power to keep you safe."

I squat down in front of Minte. I dropped down to her level so I could stare her right in the eyes.

"You've hidden in here for too long, Minte. If you stay in here, maybe the mantis will come save you in the nick of time again... Maybe it wont. But I'll tell you this... If you don't leave this place you're going to kill someone. Again. I've seen who you were and what happened to you. I don't know if it's been seconds, minutes, hours or days outside, but in the couple hours I've been here, I think, I know you well enough to say: You don't want that and you certainly don't want it all to end either."

I reached out and put my hand around the girl's head and pulled her closer. My other hand wrapped around her shoulder and held her tight against my chest. It must have been forever since she last felt this, and it's all very embarrassing for me to do so, but I'm sure it has to be done. I felt the bandages wrapped around my chest become soaked right away. Two small hands grasped onto my shoulders, and her tails dug in while she weeps quietly into my shoulder. She stayed that way for a couple of minutes, but she eventually had nothing left to let out.

I pushed her away gently, stood back up and then stepped aside. There was a straight path between her and the mantis now. There was no pushing or dragging her over. This was the part she had to decide for herself. She could walk forward, or she could run away.

Minte rubbed her eyes with her sleeves, picked herself up and dusted off her dress. She looked in the direction of the mantis, but when I did, I had to look back down. Standing on the opposite side of the ruined house, was the black silhouette and red fiery eyes of the assassin. The huge monster had suddenly shape-shifted into the form of a girl. It stood on the opposite end, unmoving, except for the antennae on top of its head.

"It would be easier on you to run away," I said honestly. "If you wake up from this nightmare, there is no going back. You're going to have to live with everything you did. Not to mention what the mantis has done in your absence. But it's the only way you're going live again. Otherwise, someone is going to live it for you, the way they want it lived."

The girl breathed slow and heavy breaths. She closed her eyes and clenched her fists. I could see her shaking, but I dared not move or say another word. One foot forward, then another. She crossed the

fallen planks of wood, over the holes and stepped over the stones in her way. She reached out with her hand and the mantis mirrored her. Their hands met, like how your hand and the reflection meet. It moved perfectly with her every subtle motion, but opposite to her.

Their fingers pushed by the imagined barrier between them and then mingled. Finally, their hands grabbed hold of one another. From the mantis' hand, the coat of black peeled away and became sparkling black dust that vanished into the air. Underneath was a shining white light in the shape of the assassin. When the obsidian was gone, the red glowing eyes exploded with white light. It nearly blinded me, forcing me to close my eyes and cover my face. When I opened them, the closed world was gone. The dark had returned, and I was floating freely in the space between hearts.

***

A mess of red covers Laven's face. Zerin's arm stretches forward and the battle rages all around him. His one good eye is closed as a feeling of euphoria washes over him; a high that could not be matched by any drug of this world. His jaw quivers while tears stream down his cheeks, the fulfilment of his holy duty causes him to glow. Whispers of praises and hallelujahs escape his mouth. His vengeance which has been so long postponed had been delivered. Cuts, broken bones and the destruction of his eye, all returned in turn. All by his hand. His hand, guided by holy providence, which nothing could resist.

Too little resistance.

The stray thought cut through Zerin's mind like a knife through warm butter. He opens his eye which had been cast toward the heavens. Something wasn't right. His right shoulder was too far forward compared to his left. He feels the resistance of Laven's head against his arm... But...

“Zerin.” The voice of the anubis calls out to him. “Let me impart you with one important lesson: You. Talk. Too. Much.”

The inquisitor looks down from the heavens and back to the earth. He sees Laven's blood covered face, but when he pulls back his arm, he sees 'his' face is still intact. His eye moves downward, ever so slightly, at his own arm. From halfway down the forearm, the rest was missing. His heart beats and a squirt of blood oozes out onto the forest floor.

The pain soon follows.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” The inquisitor screams.

He clutches his right arm and then pain shocks his body. His knees give out from under him and he hits the forest floor with his

back. With one eye wide open in shock, he looks to Laven. 'He' is still kneeling on the ground. Except... The left hand of the mantis that had been grasped onto his chest was free. She was holding it high into the air and there was a splotch of red coating its edge. He felt eyes on him and when he looked at the Green Reaper, one of the yellow compound eyes adorning the side of her head was not the dull yellow he had seen before. Some membrane had moved and now that compound eye shifts underneath, watching his movements closely.

His eye turns to the anubis, who was sneering at him. He bites down hard enough so that blood pools in his mouth from his cheeks and tongue. That bitch was just buying time since the start, is the thought racing through his mind. Pain and hatred consumed him, but his attention is soon torn back toward the assassin.

Your injury is not perseverance. It is weakness.

His eye... The anubis' knowing grin. His peripheral vision had lost sight of the mantis because of his missing eye. The bitch knew it. She knew the assassin was awake. She was just stalling for time, the whole time. He had been played for a fool.

With a 'snick', her left scythe snaps back into place against her arm, the blood is wiped off the surface of the blade just by the air rushing by it. Another thin streak of blood coats the forest floor. Her right scythe pulls away from Laven's face, then it too snicks back into place against her arm. The Reaper slowly rises to her feet and she turns to face Zerin. Survival instincts overtook his pride and his legs began to scoot him away from her as fast as they were able to. He feels a sudden chill of his blood as the Green Reaper's human eyes open. The dull and lifeless indigo eyes now glisten with life, but her stoic killer's face was still set in stone, and it zeroes in on Zerin.

But how? Why? Why did the mantis attack him? His couldn't put it together. That... isn't part of the great plan. She was ignoring her target. She was disobeying direct orders, straight from the highest authority. An Arc Assassin simply does not... never has... bite its masters.

While the Reaper slowly follows Zerin, the spell had lifted off Laven as well. Shoshanah dives in to catch his body as it falls over. With his head resting on her lap, she hunches over to cover his body with her own, her paws clutch his chest and her cheek buries itself against his cheek.

“Master Zerin!” A voice cries out from the battlefield behind them.

Sprinting across the forest floor like a gale is the elf with bow in hand. Behind her, the tomcat struggles to hold the wyvern at bay by herself. With her blonde hair trailing behind her, she closes in from behind the mantis and notches an arrow to her bow. In mid sprint and

mid leap, she yanks back the bowstring and lets it loose at the back of the assassin's head, only five meters behind her. The one unbroken antenna on her head twitches. With one hand that moves with impossible speeds and precision, she catches the arrow mid-flight behind her head, only ten centimeters from impact.

It wasn't what the elf expected. Her actions were rash, unplanned, desperate to save her master. The assassin had already surveyed the battlefield and was two steps ahead.

With masterful acrobatic finesse, the assassin leaps off her feet and then twists mid air like a rolling barrel. Another snick follows the readying of her scythe. She brings the blade down on the elf as if she was serving a volleyball with her fist. The tip of the scythe comes down on the middle point of the elf's bow, which she holds up to defend her head. The ancient wood snaps in two with ease, the blade then grazes a few golden hairs on her brow, barely misses her face and then cuts her leather corset in two. Her breasts, which had been held snugly against her chest, fall freely. Each one just covered by what were now two halves a corset. Life leaves the elf's eyes as she now holds two sticks in each hand. Strength leaves her and she hits the floor.

The mantis continues to spin, she completes her rotation and lands on both feet; her back to the elf and her front toward her quarry. She continues walking away from the broken elf, as if she had never stopped at all and continues to pursue the inquisitor. The arrow grasped in her free hand hits the ground with a clatter after she casually lets it go.

She takes a few more steps, but then her foot gets stuck. A red slimy mass slithers out from under the forest debris and starts to wrap around the mantis and bind her to the spot. The Green Reaper does not look concerned in the least, but her face hasn't shown any emotion since the start anyways.

"Master Zerin! Flee! I will-"

The assassin raises one fist into the air, back of the hand facing away. Her functioning antenna feels around in the air above her head as the slime quickly forms a body cast around her. With elbow pointing downward, along with blade retracted against her forearm, she suddenly brings it down with lightning speed. The blade easily slices into the slimy mass. All the sword swings from the Thorn Knight did nothing before, but the assassin knows where to strike.

They had trained her well. Too well.

The tip of the scythe comes down straight, but at the last second, she diverts forty five degrees away from her down hip. It cleaves easily through the jelly, but a small sticky and thick substance catches on the end.

"AaAAaAaaAh!" The slime screams, which comes out

partially a gurgle.

Ornamenting the tip of her scythe is a portion of the slime's core. The real body of any slime and hidden somewhere, anywhere, inside the slime at all times. From the core, the body grows and is replaced. If it is destroyed, the slime dies. The scythe could have easily cleaved it in twain, but she avoided it. It is still no less a mortal wound for the slime whose body begins to fall apart and blotches of jelly separate from the main body. The red slime falls to the ground like a moth lit by the flame of a candle. She coils around and in on herself, desperately trying to hold her body together through the rare feeling of pain that a slime seldom ever feels. The piece of her core stuck on the tip of the mantis' scythe disintegrates into the air.

Zerin holds tightly onto his bleeding stump as he scurries away, but he hits his back against a tree and go no further. His legs are unable to lift him, and the assassin is already looming over him. Cries of protest come from his two other henchmen, but they cannot pass through the salamander and wyvern. The inquisitor is alone. He grimaces through the pain and tries to stare down the mantis, but he does not have the composure. His trousers soil against his will.

The Green Reaper raises both hands in front of her, the spitting image of a surgeon preparing for an operation. Her hands close inwards, toward her neck and gloved fingers reach for the leather collar around her neck. The tips of her fingers slip under; It is a tight fit. The collar was attached with no intention of removing it after all. She has pushes aside her trachea and her skin starts to give way with blood beginning to flow. The Green Reaper struggles to breathe; scrapes and wounds ravage her neck as she forces her fingers further underneath the collar. With her fingers down as far as they will go, she pulls against the collar with all her might until it lets out a snap that echoes throughout the forest. Even through all the suffocating and risk or breaking her throat and neck, her face shows not a single emotion. She shows no emotion either when she tosses the collar at Zerin.

“Use that for a tourniquet.” She says, in her usual soft, quiet and monotone voice.

She almost turns her back, but she stops halfway and faces the Inquisitor again. His face is contorting in an ugly struggle between pain, confusion, terror and anger. His good eye is bloodshot, bulging and twitching uncontrollably. Zerin holds the shredded robe around his missing arm with his left in an attempt to put pressure on the wound which was still flowing. His face was growing more pale by the moment.

“Surprised?” Don't be. I don't kill anymore. Most certainly not for you.” She says, to 'you' who is no one in particular. “You tell them that.”

With those cryptic words, she turns her back on Zerin. In a puff of black smoke, the armoured and headless woman appears beside him. She cries out his name and scrambles to gather his dead weight in her arms and rises back to her feet. Her burning blue eyes glare at the back of the assassin, but she clamps down on her anger, her pride, and then runs off into the woods. The tomcat sprints by the elf who is still shell-shocked on the ground. She picks up the girl, as light as wind, and princess carries her away, leaping off into the trees. The mess of red slime, unable to collect all of herself, oozes over the forest floor, collecting half a severed hand on the way out as she scurries away.

Rose and Christophaclies tried to gave chase until they reached Laven's unconscious body. The Thorn Knight throws herself on him as well while the wyvern kneels down, spreads her wing as a shield and towers guard over all three of them. They raise their eyes in suspicion and defiance at the mantis who stood by and let Zerin and his henchmen escape. She stands tall about ten or fifteen meters from them all, her face just as stoic and expressionless as before. But her eyes slowly close and her face relaxes. Then she crumbles to the forest floor. Knees first, then her face hits the soil. It was as if strings holding her up, had just been cut and she lies motionless on the ground. Her chest rising and falling ever so slightly, the only sign she's still alive.

Chapter 64

Warmth from the lazy sun shines through sparse and snowy white clouds, and the sun clings to the horizon as though it were a warm blanket. It heralds another crisp spring morning, and the dawn crests over the hilltops and fuels a brisk breeze and dew drops in the grass. As the countryside floods with light, I emerge from the shadows of the black forest. Stretching before me lies countless acres of farm land. Fertile fields nestled in wide valleys between endless rolling hills. I have to turn my head from shoulder to shoulder just to absorb the expanse because of the cowl blocking my peripheral vision, but it is a soothing sight to see. A morning symphony of bird song compliments it and puts my soul at ease.

Being at ease was a luxury I greedily hoarded whenever I could. This wasn't friendly territory, and I needed to take steps to ensure I kept my identity hidden. I'm not sure how far and wide my arrest warrant has traveled, or if it has grabbed the attention of any other dangerous bounty hunters, but it was a safe bet to assume it had. Luckily there seemed to be a lack of forest rangers who could use the extra cash, and the untamed wilds became my highway. The irony wasn't lost on me. My only safety was with my companions in what most other people thought was a death sentence. Given my company, I assume many people assumed I was already dead; my soul rotted away to nothing. All because I've found more consistent comfort with monsters rather than with men.

I was tired of being reminded how I'm an anathema to the status quo in these parts. It would be wiser to just stick to the forests, but there was one more thing which had to be done. It was something bigger than just myself, and I didn't spend a whole day convincing my companions for nothing. It had to be done, and I refused to make this two day detour in vain. Especially after spending half of that with someone who had spent a whole day trying to kill me not even a week ago.

Gliding silently behind my right shoulder was the assassin, likewise hidden underneath a cloak. She never spoke nor made a sound. I often have to look over my shoulder just to make sure she hasn't vanished into thin air. Camouflage was an instinct to her; it came naturally, and she could easily melt into the forest. Even so, no matter how many times I asked, she refused to take point. I haven't the slightest clue why, and I've given up hope that I'll ever understand what she's thinking. She couldn't be planning to run me through; I knew that much. If that was still her goal, then she's had a thousand opportunities in just the last couple of days. Her face being mostly obscured by a cowl didn't help my trying to understand the assassin; but even without

it, her face never showed a single emotion. If she never blinked I could swear her face was a fresco stone mask.

This wasn't another chance meeting either, she had come, tried to kill me, saved my life and then never left. It had the other girls on edge, not to mention myself, when she stayed nearby and just out of sight. She kept this game of hers up for days, but she fled each time we tried to confront her, and every time she returned. This kept happening without fail ever since she had sent Zerin packing.

I'd heard it was quite the fight, and Rose never shut up about it since I woke back up. I had come so close to death, but I didn't mind missing out if it meant I didn't have to look that madman in the face. After hearing what happened, I think we'll be rid of him for quite some time. The man is insane though; he has a grudge and now more than just one bone to pick with me. I have a feeling our third meeting would not be the last.

Nothing I heard about the fight told me why the mantis girl was continuing to stalk me. She woke up, saved my life, passed out and then woke back up when I did several hours later. Then she ran off into the woods before we could confront her. Maybe we should have tied her up, but I don't think that's possible, what with her blades and all. I expected that might be the last we would see of her, but when I started seeing her out of the corner of my eye the next day, that expectation was dashed against the rocks.

We tried to ignore her and continue our journey. There were other worries plaguing us now. Our ticket south was now scrap metal at the bottom of a ravine, so our only option was to travel by foot. Repair crews were no doubt descending upon that bridge, so we had to keep away from tracks and cut through the forests. It would be another week until Chris would be ready to fly again, so we were going blind with only the light of the stars and the motion of the sun across the sky to guide us. Then I learned we would need to take yet another detour.

Susan shuddered as we crossed an imaginary line, and she became aware of some bone chilling laws of a new land we had stumbled into. They were fierce laws against monster kind, and we wouldn't want to agitate the locals. But when I heard which land the laws belonged to, I understood what had to be done. I finally figured out how to dispel a sinking feeling of a job not yet complete and our stalker problem.

Terenberg, the town I had seen in my dreams. Minte's home town. The place where the assassin was born. It was a small world after all.

The assassin was a stark contrast to the girl I met in that other realm. Although their faces were basically identical, the way she acted

now showed not a trace of Minte. If I had to hazard a guess, and Minte was in there, the expression showing on her face as she tarried behind was apprehension. In the distance were the fields surrounding Terenberg, the town from Minte's memories. It's the linchpin in sealing away her past for good. The last of her demons are in this place, and they have to be met. There are things she has to know for better or worse. Running away and remaining ignorant just meant there would forever be a weak spot in her heart. If that imperfection remained, then perhaps she'd regress back to who she was.

I didn't have to think too hard to remember what that was like. If she continued to stalk me with such an unstable and malleable heart, I shudder to think my death is still an inevitability. But then again, I might just be leading her to the slaughter. Not hers, but someone's. They had been scattered, but there was an army of dark and negative thoughts hiding in the recesses of her psyche. A thousand scars were carved into it, and the past could crawl out from any of them at any time. I couldn't just let that be. If not just for my safety but for her well being as well.

And that is why we are marching straight into danger. That is why I spent two whole days convincing Rose, Susan and Chris to let me do this, alone. We'd rendezvous at the southern fringes of Terenberg after we had confronted these demons, and Minte would finally be free.

I really am an idiot, aren't I?

The trees surrounding the town had been cut back for kilometers, that was the first thing I noticed. Empty grazing fields for as far as the eye could see replaced them; but when we climbed to the highest hills, we spotted it in the distance. Words from Smould surfaced in my head. His prediction had been correct; the town had grown in the time between Minte's memories and the present. It was no longer a town but a city. A wooden palisade surrounded it, a fortress sitting at the bottom of a valley. Farmlands and small hamlets scattered around it in all directions. Creeks coiled and crisscrossed their way at the bottom of the miniature valleys, and the place was a veritable fertile crescent.

Our goal was not to sight-see, so we pressed onward and came across the eerie remains of a building surrounded by tall unkempt grass and weeds. It lay on the outskirts of the city, still well beyond the walls and separated from the hamlets. A foundation for what must have been a very large house was all that remained. I vaguely recalled the forest in its backyard, but that had vanished. I could feel what it was, and Minte could as well. For the first time, she stepped forward on her own and walked amongst the fallen stones and rotting wood.

Quite some time ago, the place had burned down. Black and ashen wood showed signs of being washed away from the rain and snow as the seasons changed. Smooth stones had been exposed similarly to the elements and the winds. The greatest destruction seemed to occur in the northwest corner of the ruins.

"Arson," I said. "Very likely... It looks like it's been years, but from what I can tell, the fire started in the corner here. Where it seems to have been the hottest... Perhaps from the outside..."

I looked back at the mantis who stood in the center of the ruins. She remained motionless, her face emotionless. I doubt she even heard me. Whatever had once been here has long since vanished. If it wasn't rescued from the flames or looted afterward, it had burned away. When she did move, it was to ever so casually hold a hand up to her neck. She held it there as though she were trying to massage away an ancient crick in her neck. I walked away from the scorched corner, approached the girl and placed my hand gently on her shoulder. Her head slowly turned to face me.

"There's nothing this place can tell us. We need to look in town."

Minte lowered her hand, turned her head away and slowly looked over the ruins one last time before her head came back the other way. She looked up at me and nodded solemnly. When I walked away and leaped off the ruins, she silently followed my lead. She looked back only one more time before she put it all behind her as we approached the city gates. We didn't have much time to dig around and mourn. The last thing I want is to be late and have three enraged monsters start burning the city down looking for us.

Along the way, we walked past the serfs and peasants as they tilled the fields in preparation for sowing the fall's future harvest. It was not the kind reception I remember receiving up north. All the men, women and even children who busied themselves with hoes and oxen driven plows barely had more than a nod of acknowledgement for the two of us as we walked down the dirt roads. There were no kind words or waving of their hands in greeting. Cloaked as we were, we could possible mean trouble; or perhaps, it was just the mentality of the people who lived in this region. Either way, we were being left alone, and that was fine by me.

The gates leading into Terenberg were not as neutral and every bit as unkind. Two guards stood at attention on each side of the wide swung open doors, and another eight milled about; their eyes watchful of every person entering and leaving. Their eyes became incredibly suspicious when they spotted us, and they openly tried to intimidate us with the swagger in their steps and stink eye on their faces.

"Hold it," one of the two at the door said with his arm

outstretched. “We're going to need you to lower your hoods.”

Paranoia seemed to be endemic around these parts. I might get away with lowering my hood, but there would be problems if Minte did the same. This was all a little overkill, to be screening everyone who tries to get into the city. I hadn't expected problems like this, but Minte produced an open envelope from underneath her robe. She stepped forward for the second time and presented it to the guard in front. His friend still had a firm grip on the heft of his billhook; but when the guard was done examining the contents of Minte's letter, he waved his hand back in a near panic.

“R-right mam. Sorry to hold up your business. Go on your way.” His voice shook as he waved us along.

I caught a glance of the envelope when the guard handed it back to Minte; the Star of the Almighty was the seal on it along with the cryptic runes covering it. It must be some sort of passport or missive from the church. A saving grace at a time like this, but one I doubt would be useful for longer than a week from now.

“What about him?” The guard in the back asked, pointing at me.

“With me,” Minte replied coldly.

There wasn't any need for another word. They parted the way for us, and I followed the assassin beyond the gates. The one guard was lecturing the other when I looked back. I found it ironic that his extreme paranoia would later be vindicated; but for now, we were free to enter the city and do our business. It won't take longer than a day, and then we'd both be on our way.

The mood inside the city wasn't any better than the outside. Perhaps their collective mood had been spoiled by the guards outside? Everything was very business orientated with little room for pleasantries, that was the impression it left on me. It was very different from the market square that waved and chatted with Minte in her memories. There was tension in the air and a miasma of distrust that soaked into the fiber of this city's being. I had only a few pieces of information about its past, but no doubt the answer lay among them.

Little in the town had changed, beyond the outer rungs of the new city there was the old town, and at the center of the old town was the market square. It seems as though nothing had changed, only the volume of traffic and people walking the streets. Familiar streets that Minte walked and navigated like there was a map on the palm of her hand. It was not long until we found ourselves standing in the shadow of a quaint little shop.

Hanging above the doorway was a wooden sign, but there was no picture of a boot. The wood carving now depicted a shining diamond, the sign swaying on its hinges in the breeze. Minte was

frozen on the spot looking up at the new sign. The flow of people in the market roamed around her as she appeared like a blister in time, and the world was passing her by again. She wasn't going to be budged, so I was the one who approached the door and gave it a knock. A few moments pass before the door swings open and reveals an aging man from within.

"Can I help you?" He spits, forgetting his salesmanship and manners.

He looked over the hill with scraggly white hair sticking out from the sides of his head with a bald spot on top of his head. His face was sunken with wrinkles, and his eyes were black and beady. He certainly didn't look like him, but I asked anyways.

"Mr. Nemitz?"

"Mister who?" He said indignantly. "You've got the wrong place."

He was about to shut the door in my face so I slipped my foot in the doorway.

"This building used to belong to a Nemitz family. Do you know them?"

"I'm a jeweller, not the census taker, you-"

"Dear? Who is it?" A pleasant old woman's voice came from within.

The jeweller looked irritated at just the sound of her voice, but he didn't have the energy or the will to muster a complaint. After a few seconds, a kindly looking old woman, her image befitting her voice, emerged beside the man.

"Hello mam." I said bowing slightly, "We're looking for a family that used to live here. Goes by 'Nemitz'."

The old man tried to butt in, "I said we're not-"

"Yes, we bought this place from the man decades ago," She said without hesitation.

"Fine then." The man said annoyed, I'm heading back to the shop. You entertain the guests."

He stormed off in the direction of the workshop, and the woman I assumed was his wife fully took his place at the door. Her hair was cut short and was pure snowy white. Her face was far less wrinkled than the old man's, but the arc in her back and shakiness of her joints told me she was no younger than the old codger who stomped away. Eyes that glittered just like a diamond decorated her face and completed her angelic and motherly visage. She spoke with a soothing voice despite her husband's rude departure.

"Why do you ask, young man?"

"We're looking for him, Mrs.-"

"Crim. Gina Crim," She said with a smile.

“Mrs. Crim, do you know what has become of Mr. Nemitz?”

“Well... He sold this house and workshop to us about thirty years ago.”

Thirty years? I found that number hard to process. Decades really had passed. I looked back to Minte who was looking away, nursing her neck.

“His eyesight was getting weaker, and he wasn't selling many shoes before that. I never knew him, but I heard he's still around. It's been a long time since then, he's probably at the boarding house.”

All this time... He was still here. I looked back at Minte who seemed to have come back down to earth and was staring at the old woman intently, hanging on her every word.

“That's all we needed to know, thank you,” I said with another bow.

Minte kept staring at the old lady, and it felt as though the kind old woman would invite us in at any moment. I was afraid of that. There was nothing here any longer. Staying too long in one place, and possibly scaring the wits out of an old couple got more likely. This place was highly anti-monster, the last thing we need to do is spoil good hospitality by revealing just who we were. I turned around and placed my hand on her shoulder, let go and then walked past her. When I looked back after a few steps past her, she gave the place a last, long and hard look before she hesitantly turned her back to it and followed me.

Finding this boarding house proved to be much easier than I anticipated. It was impossible to miss. At the very centre of the city, a new building I couldn't have missed from Minte's memories towered over everything, a huge cathedral about sixty meters high. Attached to its right side was a huge wooden building that looked like communal housing. The huge luminous bronze star that hung above the entrance of the cathedral was all I needed to see to know what we were dealing with. It was a monument to what everyone called their god, The Almighty. The north was awash with pagans, and we were supposedly far from the capital, so I never expected to see a new architectural marvel so far north. In the gardens before it, a statue depicted a band of knights standing their ground. I slowly and painstakingly worked my way through the runes and gathered enough letters and words to make sense of it. It commemorated the battle of Clearbrook Falls.

A battlefield where dozens of the north's finest fell, huh? I seem to recall hearing a similar story. The senior Smould had talked about it in Minte's memories. It was a town near this city that fell and became a demon realm. An aggressive takeover. Something I heard people were terrified of but had not happened for decades. Working from the date, it seemed to have happened forty-one years ago.

Forty years ago, the situation got bad. Really bad. Monsters didn't just roam the woods. It wasn't safe outside the cities. Some of them could disguise themselves, infiltrate. Strongholds would fall from the inside

Familiar words bubbled up to the forefront of my thoughts. Donald Ceerly. He told me something like this some time ago.

It had been like that for about a hundred years before, but it started getting really bad at that point. People were scared. Before it got too bad, beyond the point of no return, there was a hero that stepped forward. He said he'd go and stop the Monster Lord.

"And then it all suddenly stopped, didn't it?" I said aloud to myself. "Everything was peaceful for a time... The warpath just ended."

Would that mean what I also saw in Minte's memories was-?

"Excuse me." A woman's voice called out to me.

I was startled when a woman in a nun's habit approached me and called out to me with a concerned expression on her face. Her face was riddled with freckles, worn and sunken by the years but not quite elderly. A middle aged woman with homely looks and a pudgy waist. The expression of concern on her face was sincere, and I felt bad for what was no doubt a flash of fear on my face.

"No- sorry, I was just reading."

I looked behind me and saw Minte was still standing behind me like my own shadow. Her presence was so low that the nun hardly acknowledged her at all.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you might be lost. You looked disturbed."

"Ah, no, well, we're a bit lost, yes. We're looking for the boarding house."

The nun flashed a smile, "Why, you've found it. I am one of the 'mothers' in charge of it as well."

Her concern had evaporated. She was brimming with vigor and was nearly glowing since she now knew she could be of some help to some hapless travelers. Her cheery mood was a complete about face from the sour mood that hung over the entire city, and it didn't fail to lift my own heart.

"We're looking for someone. We heard he's staying with you... A Mr. Nemitz."

"Mr. Nemitz," She said clasping her hands together. "Why yes, he is a long time resident."

I could feel Minte's weight and presence shift behind my back. She took in a deep breath of air, it was subtle, but everything was so subtle about her that even such a small break in her monotony stood out.

"Can you take us to him? We have urgent... business."

“Mr. Nemitz has been retired for quite some time. Are you relatives?”

I looked back at Minte who was already looking at me. I expected her to have the same panicked expression that I did, but her face was just as it was any other time, stone cold solid. There's no honor or excusing yourself for lying to a nun, but I'd have to bite the bullet.

“I'm his grandnephew, and this is his new in-law. We're traveling through the area but my grandmother hasn't heard from her brother in quite some time. I thought we'd check in and try to keep everyone in touch.”

Better than nothing.

“Oh, I see,” She replied, smiling.

That smile hurt.

“He should be awake this early. I'd be happy to show you the way. It's a big place. Someone new could get lost easily.”

The nun went on ahead, and I turned toward Minte and shrugged my shoulders. Perhaps I was apologizing on reflex for dragging her into my lie, but she didn't seem the least bit bothered. At least it didn't show, but nothing ever shows with her.

We followed the nun into the boarding house. It was very utilitarian without a wasted penny on luxury. Practical to a fault, it felt very sterile and unlike a home. There didn't seem to be a single trapping of comfort in the wooden halls, but it did have the air of a community to it all the same. Open spaces for gardens were the only touch of color besides the sunlight through each open window. People of all types gathered in the common rooms, and behind each door were bunks and dormitories filled to capacity. Besides the other nuns and priests that wandered and tended to the residents, were those very residents themselves who all looked worse for wear.

It was a boarding house, so it shouldn't be too surprising it was filled with all manner of people down on their luck. The sick, the young and the old. The have nots, the homeless and the wretched and crippled. There was definitely a pattern going on. The nun who had been excitedly guiding us suddenly slowed down, sighed and walked beside me.

“How rude of me,” She chastised herself. “I am sister Shena... Mister?”

“Neval. Mr. Neval. This is my... wife... er...”

I stumbled for a name.

“Olga,” Minte said, her first word in a long time.

Nice save, but I need to push the conversation along.

“We've been touring the north for a while, but we've never seen a place like this before.”

“Yes. This type of boarding house began here decades ago.” She said glowingly, ignoring or immune to the awkwardness we just had. “It quickly became popular through the empire. For you see, the battle against demons does not only take place on the battlefield but in the streets and in the hearts of many people. They care not for wealth, status, age or even health. If you ignore your most vulnerable, you will lose their souls. We receive generous funding from the tithe gifted to the Church, and we take care of those who are down on their luck or have nowhere else to go.”

Well now, this is a change of pace to how the Church has presented itself to me lately. As we walked through the halls of the house, up its stairs and around its corners, I spotted all sorts of sights. Men, women, the elderly and children dressed in rags and eating full bowls of hot porridge. I saw prayer rooms led by other priests and nuns with the downtrodden on their knees within the pews. Their hands clasped in prayer toward the bronze idol of a star.

“You see, there are many ugly rumours. You've no doubt heard of demon realms if you are travelling. Places you must stay away from. Well, some say that the incubi lords and kings, men corrupted by monsters, are sometimes men who were just serfs and peasants.”

“And women who were in the same position.” I added.

“Yes. A terrible thing. Giving up one's soul like that. I pray for them, but I fear they will receive their punishment in the end. I strive to make sure such a cruel fate is not in store for my flock.”

“Must be tough. There are a lot of people here who look... a bit ragged. The alternative looks not so bad-”

“I assure you, Mr. Neval, that there is only sadness and eventual oblivion that awaits them. Those that stray from The Almighty’s path will find themselves lost in the dark. Stray too far and they will stumble in that dark never to find it again. I would not wish that upon anyone!”

Path?

“Surely, there are many that think living as a serf compared to-”

“We are all one part of his great and mighty plan. Our eternal reward awaits us for serving him and allowing our souls to be saved and protected by him. When we go to our final rest, we will find our eternal reward, to bask in his light forever.”

She looked absolutely euphoric as she held her hands together in prayer upon invoking her god like that. I found my thoughts stray to something else. I had heard this kind of reasoning before. The Great Chain of Being. God above, his angel servants below, then kings and his nobles above the common folk. What would kings and queens think

of a world where their stable hand gains the favour of a mighty demon or monster? What happens to their kingdom when it becomes a demon realm? Who rules then?

Upheaval and anarchy... I was beginning to understand this world more and more as time went on. I dared not say anything else, I risked turning this sweet middle aged lady into a firebrand preacher or worse if I pushed any further and ruined her euphoria. Just as well too, she stopped once she reached a lone door at the end of the hallway.

Shera knocked on the door gently and called out to those inside.

"Mr. Nemitz, you've got visitors."

"Tommie?" A hoarse and old voice shouted from the other side, "Tommie if that's you, I ain't got another dime for you. Ya bum!"

A bad day to visit?

"No, sir. It's not Tommie today. They're relatives from out-of-town." She turned to us and spoke quietly with a hushed voice, "I think it's best if you just go in."

I nodded, then Minte and I walked in when Shena opened the door. It was as barren a room as all the others. Two beds, a single window and two small dressers. There wasn't room for anything else. Sitting on the left bed was a scruffy looking man who had all the earmarks of a no good bum. Long shaggy hair no doubt ridden with lice and a terrible odour. On the opposite side was an old man. A bushy white moustache sat like a caterpillar under his nose, and there wasn't a single hair on top of his head. He was stringy, hardly a muscle on his bones, and his limbs were more like twigs. His eyes were also milk white, a serious and crippling case of cataracts, his face was snarled in a frown as he followed our entry with his ears, complete with bushels of hair jutting out from them.

"I've got my morning rounds to make, so I'll just leave you to catch up." The nun excused herself and hastily rushed back to her duties.

My eyes then turned to the slack jawed bum who was staring at the two of us at the doorway. I felt an instant twinge of disgust but also sympathy just looking at him. But he was just another pair of eyes and ears that needed to leave. Through his shaggy hair, I could spot his beady eyes that shook with fear. I didn't blame him, Minte and I didn't look like pleasant company, what with all the cloak and dagger imagery. The imagination is a wild thing that can jump to a lot of conclusions very quickly.

I approached the man while I slipped my hands inside my cloak. He stayed still on his bed like a frightened rabbit. I fished out a single gold coin and held it out toward him.

"Take it and go. If no one bothers us, or eavesdrops, you'll

get another one before I leave."

The shining gold token caused his weary and beady eyes to beam. His grubby hands slowly reached out and shook more and more the closer they got. I let it go so that it would fall into his hands. A better alternative than getting his grit and smell on me. That might not wash out with just one bath. He bit on it with a mouth only half full of teeth to test if it was real, and when he tasted it, he could barely contain his excitement. I didn't want a word of thanks, I wanted him out of the room, so I threw my thumb back toward the door and stepped out-of-the-way. There wasn't a need to make it any clearer, he ran out of the room as if his ass had caught fire.

"Who are you?" Nemitz asked. "I don't recognize your voice. You ain't my son!"

I walked over to the door, looked down the hallway and spotted no one, then closed it shut. The click was quiet, but the old man's hearing was keen, and his head swung in my direction. My job was done; now I stood guard at the door and watched Minte closely. She stood in the middle of the room, staring at the floor while the old man was still demanding answers to his questions. His voice started getting weaker and weaker the more he tried to sound intimidating and angry. He was afraid.

Minte slowly pulls back her hood and exposes her antennae and extra insectoid eyes to the world. The milky white eyes of the old man don't even flinch. He is definitely blind as a bat. His head tries to follow the mantis as she moves silently over the floor, but even his ears can't hear her, yet he seems to sense her regardless. A sixth sense perhaps? A sense I became all too familiar with.

The old man is still sitting up in his bed with his back against the headboard, and he finally faces the right direction when Minte sits down on the bed beside him. She reaches out from her cloak's sleeve and lays it on top of the old man's skinny liver spotted hand. The moment she squeezes it tightly, the tension in the old man's face melts and is replaced by equal parts wonder and bewilderment. His other hand crosses over from the other half of the bed, shaking all the way, and searches for Minte. It reaches her at last and his finger tips touch against her cheek. He cups her cheek in his hand and rubs it as though to make sure it is real. His lips tremble.

"...It can't be..."

Crystal clear tears stream down from the old man's milky white eyes.

"Is this a dream?" Nemitz says, nearly choking. "If it is, why can't I see?"

His hand moves from her cheek to her jawline, her chin, lips and nose. It gently moves over her eyes, but her hand reaches out and

seizes his gently and brings it back to her cheek before he reaches her head.

"Am I dead? I can't be. She wouldn't ever be... where I-"

The old man's face was slowly becoming a wreck. Snot was running down his nose, the tears broke the dam and they were out of control. Her face though, it remains unchanged. Minte's face was like solid granite, and her old man's was like wet clay.

"Hello-" She said without emotion, "papa."

Now the old man was moaning, wailing out loud as the tears turn his eyes red.

"But this isn't home. This isn't home, Minte." He cried.

The mantis moves closer to the old man and let his head rest on her shoulder. She pats the back of his head. They remain like that for a minute until the old man's tears run dry. Minte pulls back so that her father can collect himself the best he can. His hands reach out for her face one more time. Slowly tracing over her facial features, painting the image of it all as a picture in his head.

"I never should've done it. Gods curse me, I should never have done it. Snakes and vipers!" He spits. "Said you'd be happier. Liars! They never even searched the forest. But I knew you were still in there... That maybe... One day... You'd come home."

The old man was shivering now. I'm sure his mind was reeling backwards from several emotions trying to bubble to the surface at once.

"Ten years came and went, Minte... Your father failed. I couldn't wait. We owned our home, but my eyes began to fail me. A curse for me, I know it! I could hardly sell shoes before then, but I had to sell the house."

Her hand moves over to her neck again.

"I sent Jerald to boarding school. He ended up in the capital. Apprenticed to a big shot magician. Now he does scribing and digging in the south. He sends money back. But that's all the good I ever did... Tommie... Tommie hated my guts ever since I sent you away. He grew up, fell with the wrong crowd. I no longer had a shop to teach him, no one would take him as an apprentice. All my fault. And Pep... Pep... I couldn't watch after her. I sent her to my sister, but she grew sick one winter and didn't make it. She was... Too much like her mother... So now I pay the tithe with Jerald's money, and I get a bed here, but it isn't living. But... I kept hoping... Hoping one day... But is this a dream? Or am I dy-"

Minte leans over and kisses the old man's forehead. The reality shock fries every nerve in his body completely, and old man is left speechless. His eyes well up with tears again, and his voice becomes hoarse and unable to speak. Minte runs her hand under her father's

eyes, wipes away the tears and stares at him for another minute. Her face is every bit as emotionless as it was the previous minute. But words fail the girl as well, so she slowly slips away, caressing her father's cheek one last time as she gets off the bed.

“W-wait!” He begs. “Minte!” His head turns in the direction of the door, toward me. “You there, where are you going? Who are you?”

“Your daughter can't stay. Mr. Nemitz... Just know that she's in a better place now. I'm determined to see that through.”

“But- She's still so young. She should be an old lady by-”

“She's free... And she doesn't blame you. But you knew that already.”

“Are- Are you are guardian angel?”

Those words pierced my heart. They were so heartfelt, so sincere that I couldn't bring myself to answer. Answering that would make me sick to my stomach by guilt alone. There's no way his keen hearing would not pick up the faint insincerity in my voice.

“Yes,” Minte said monotonously. “He is.”

I felt those words squeeze my heart for another reason altogether. Her father's head went slack and his eye cast downward. Even though he couldn't see, the gesture seemed innate, as though his body relaxed after a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. A small smile curls on one side of his mouth and he 'looks' back toward the door and only nods.

“Believe what you want to believe, Mr. Nemitz.”

He didn't have anything else to say and neither did Minte. She walked backward a couple steps still staring at her father, but then she turned around and faced me. I turned the handle on the door and opened it for her to walk through. She was hesitant, looking back once more, but she walked through. I followed behind her and shut the door.

Chapter 65

Dawn had broken, and the sun had traveled across the sky, but now it was falling, and it would soon paint the land red with the color of dusk. The weight of night was pulling down on the fiery yellow sphere, but I felt a weight off my own shoulder. My job was now done; the assassin didn't have the courage to take this journey on her own, so I had to convince her just as I did with the others who objected to the whole enterprise, but in the end, I'd call it a success. Just as a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Minte's presence was much lighter as well; you couldn't tell by looking, but you could feel it.

Now that my primary objective was complete, I was free to move onto secondary matters. Or so I thought.

"This will probably be the last time you have to visit your home town... Don't you have anything else to see? Anyone else to meet?"

I turn around and face the cloaked mantis standing behind me. She looks up at me through the shadows cast by her hood and stares at me with her stoney indigo eyes. I scratched the back of my head in vexation, and my eyes find their way upward toward the sky. Chills run down my body as a greater shadow covers the market square. Clouds were pulling over the city like a blanket, and they were not the snowy clouds of the morning but grey and stormy. The market would probably close early, and the roads and woods would be muddy and unsuitable for walking upon.

"I'm serious," I said, trying to sound sterner. "I'm just doing some shopping; grabbing some supplies in town before I meet back up with my friends... If I had the chance but didn't bring back some choice dried meat... Rose would never let me hear the end of it..."

I look back down, but the girl hadn't budged. The two of us standing in the middle of the street with people moving by and around us stood out, and I became increasingly aware of their stares.

"Alright, have it your way," I resigned and threw my hands up into the air. "I'm the one who said it after all. I can't tell you what to."

I visited shop after shop, but the shadow of the girl never left me. Every time I looked behind me I saw her no further than a couple footsteps behind me. I could feel her presence like a pang in the back of my head that I couldn't shake. An uncomfortable feeling that something lay just behind your head and could touch you at any moment, but never did. My eyes were constantly drawn to what seemed like a nervous tic, her hands reaching up for her neck.

"Hey, good sir!" A man's voice calls out from the market din. "You have the airs of a man who can appreciate the finer wares of this market. Here I have the finest silks from the four corners of the empire.

Ingenious and luxurious products of the Master Ceerly himself."

With that one name, he had my attention. The shady looking merchant with a silly beret like hat on his head and small eyes waved his hands over a collection folded silks of all colors. I noticed Minte's attention was for once not on me but on some silly puppet shows on the other side of the market. Maybe she was too shy to join them?... No matter.

I picked up one of the red silks rolls, thin and not terribly long. It wasn't anything more than a ribbon. It was a very fine piece, but it was the smallest out of all them by far.

"That little guy costs only twenty gold."

That sounds outrageous even to me.

"Or, I have these others, five gold." He says, patting down the other folded silks.

I smelled a rat. I took the two ends of the ribbon and pulled on them. Flexible, tough as steel. Like spider silk. The merchant protested when I did so, but he couldn't stop me when I grabbed on his other silks and did the same, only for it to rip and tear with ease. His face went wide with shock, then rage, but before he could speak, I had some words of my own.

"You know, I actually know Ceerly."

His anger abated then died. It was replaced with apprehension.

"I've seen a lot of his silks. This red one here seems to be one... But these others..." I mused.

They were not spider silk. They were faulty and cheap knockoffs.

"W-well-" The merchant blustered.

"Doing business by putting a real work of Ceerly as very expensive bait and then switch... You're not trying to sell cheap knock offs, are you?"

"Of course not, I-... How about a discount?"

I turn my head to look down the street and spot some armored men patrolling the market, "Oh, hey. I better ask the guards what they think of-"

"Big discount!" He screams, getting the attention of some passersby who look as they continue on.

I hold up the red one, the real one and speak clearly, "Two gold for this one."

"That's! I-...." He goes silent then grumbles angrily before reaching his hand out.

I pass over the two coins, pocket the silk and walk away. Ceerly has most likely passed away by now. The last thing this world needs is his memory and hard work being trampled upon like that. Especially when the world hears of his passing and guys like this start charging

twice as much.

When I turned around, the mantis was gone. Perhaps she had finally remembered something she had to do, or maybe she had finally decided to move on? I shrugged my shoulders and felt a drop of water on my face. It seems the clouds would break in under an hour, and the grey clouds are starting to gather and turn black. I was already weighed down with satchels slung over my shoulder filled with tools and meat, so I decided I'd have to spend the night in town rather than rough it outside.

Finding inns was easy. Getting an open room at one that looked like the place was cleaned regularly was hard. Finally, I got a key for a nice bed and breakfast looking establishment and lumbered my way up to the second floor and into the first room on the right. The door swung shut behind me; I dropped everything I was carrying on the floor with a thud and slipped out of my cloak which was already quite damp. A hand reached from behind my right side, and I reflexively let it take hold of my cloak.

"Thanks..."

Wait a second.

I turned around, and Minte was standing there looking up at me with a blank expression on her face as she held my cloak.

"Holy shi-!" I screamed and nearly fell over backwards when I jumped from the spot. "Where the hell did- how did you-... No. Never mind."

What did she want now? I thought she might have finally gone her own way after stalking me for nearly a week... And no doubt tracking me down for some time before we met. Either she knew somehow where I was going, or she was actually behind me the whole time so she never actually left. Both possibilities scared me out of my wits.

"If you were looking for a place to stay, and you were going to follow me, I would have just gotten a bigger room."

Her slightly damp cloak was already hung over the back of the one chair by the room's lone window. I looked back to the girl standing by the door, motionless and emotionless as ever. Except when I looked at her this second time she broke eye contact and looked away off to the side. Her hand came up and scratched her neck, just like she had been doing all day. Maybe she had been doing it earlier too...

There were scratch marks from her fingers, but there were also scars in the tissues around her neck. It had been encased in super tight leather for years. I heard she had ripped the skin tight collar off with her bare hands. It was a rather ugly sight to behold. Which is odd, because these monsters are always anything but. All as if by design. I fished the red ribbon out from my pocket.

“I don't know if it hurts or you're just self conscious about it.... But here. Take this.” I say as I hold the ribbon out to the girl.

She looks back over in my direction and then down at the ribbon in my hand. Her delicate gloved hand reaches out. I very nearly pull back when I look further up her arm and see the scythe still attached to her wrist, folded back against her forearm. My flinch causes her to stop and flinch as well, but I hold steady, and she eventually, after a moment of hesitation, reaches out and pulls the ribbon from my grip.

I walked over to the table by the window and grabbed a vase full of flowers. I yanked them out, laid them back on the table and dipped my thumb into the vase, soaking it in water. I then turned back and walked up to the mantis who was still staring blankly at the ribbon in her hand.

“You also don't have to worry about what it looked like back there. You might not show it; but believe me, I can feel it... Close your eyes.”

She looked up at me, didn't mutter a word, but then did as I asked. I took my wet thumb and rubbed it under her eye. Then I dabbed my thumb back into the vase and rubbed my thumb under her other eye. After going back and doing each once more I stepped back. She opened her eyes, then raised one hand to her face and dabbed her fingers against the water flowing down her cheeks.

“That's what you wanted to do but couldn't, right?” I said gently with a smile.

I turned around, picked up my bought goods off the floor and let them rest under the table. I put the flowers back in the vase and set it all back as it was before. But when I turned around, I saw Minte standing as she typically is but with the red ribbon tied in a four leafed bow tie around her neck. It was wide enough to cover the scars left behind by the collar, but I was more impressed that she managed that all in less than ten seconds while I wasn't looking. I continued looking up, and our eyes met again, only I noticed her stoney face had a tinge of red blush to her cheeks. I felt my heart thump, and I looked away and upward on instinct. It was then I noticed her antennae.

They wiggled and squirmed like creatures of their own. Each as thin as a pinky finger but at least forty centimeters in length. While her face was stoic as always, they moved freely rubbing against one another like the knees of an embarrassed school girl. When I looked back down, I noticed her eyes were also darting side to side nervously.

“W-well-” I said, my voice cracking a bit. “I've got a bit of walking tomorrow. Better get some rest.”

I turned around and tried to make a dash for the bed, but I felt a weight press up against my back. Two small hands grabbed hold of my

leather jerkin, and I felt the side of the girl's face press up against my back just below the neck, between my shoulder blades. I came to a stop, not just because I froze on the spot, but because she was also holding me back. It was such a delicate looking embrace, but she was a monster after all.

"Uh, Minte?"

Her antennae started poking my back like fingers. They felt their way up my shoulders and then started tapping the back of neck. Sometimes they poked; other times they slid over my skin. Their pressure felt like fingers, but the texture was entirely unlike human skin. It was smooth chitin, segmented into hundreds of parts, each groove between the chitin gave it a feeling like the grooves between the rings of a tree. Every time they tapped me; I felt a shiver; a cold finger running slowly down my spine. I spun around on the spot to face the girl.

"Hold on a-"

The feelers didn't stop. They were no longer tapping and tracing over my back and neck but now moved onto my cheeks, nose and chin. Her hands grabbed hold of the two halves of my jerkin, her legs locked in position and she held me steady to the spot. My eyes twitched and flinched as they continued to explore my face. I thought at any moment she might accidentally poke one of my eyes out with one of them, but she never did. They seem to move as though their goal was to map out my entire face, but they pulled back suddenly and fussed with one another. I look down and see the mantis' face blush even redder than before, even though her expression hasn't changed at all. One of her feelers then taps me on the lip and then pulls back quickly. She lets out a sigh from her mouth, the first sound she's made ever since sneaking into my room.

That sigh was spoken in a universal language; I knew all too well. This situation was about to get out of hand; the girl who was usually so in control was slipping, and I had to do something. Her antennae, after their initial retreat, came back and started poking against my lips again. Then they started rubbing and tracing back and forth along them as well.

"Minte, sto-"

I reached out with one hand and grabbed hold of one antenna; it was a bad decision. It wasn't just a sigh that escaped through her nose this time; it was a full blown moan she stifled with her pursed lips. Her knees gave out, and she fell to the floor. I had to bend down with her so I wouldn't end up holding her up by her feeler that was squirming like mad in my grip. When I came to my senses, I let go and held onto the girl by her shoulders. She was shaking.

"Whoa- Are you alright. Sorry, I didn't mean to-"

She was breathing heavily. Her hands let go of my jacket and moved over to her breast. She cupped one hand over the other and then pressed down on her chest, right over her heart. The elastic fabric of her bodysuit gave way, and the springy flesh of her modest chest squished underneath. Even through the chitinous armor covering her shoulder, I could feel heat radiating out of her. Monstrous instincts were taking over, and she looked up at me; her face stoney, but her eyes quivering. A moist and thin trial of drool escaped from the corner of her tight lipped mouth. Hot and heavy breaths escaped from her nose, and her cheeks were burning red.

Her hands moved away from her chest, and she slipped them underneath her chitinous shoulder pads to slip them off. The light armor that was covering her shoulders, breasts and sides of her waist dropped off and clattered to the floor in two pieces beside her. She suddenly looked far thinner and far more vulnerable. I barely noticed the scythes still attached to her arms, but her second mantid abdomen rising up from behind her, twitching in rhythm with her body, was impossible to miss. The membranes covering her insect wings which lay underneath squirmed and slid over top and against one another. The yellow sheen of her large compound eyes shimmied, and I felt the hundred fold compound eyes focus entirely on me, and two smaller ones hidden underneath her hair line on her forehead did the same.

With the armor no longer in the way, she pressed herself closer to me. Her forcefulness bowled me over onto my back as she now weighed down on me, rubbing her body on top of mine as though she were trying to bury herself. She was light as a feather, but she still had monstrous strength from somewhere. Her muscles were hydraulic like an insect's; it was easy for her to exert a tremendous amount of strength. Slow, but inevitable. Patient, but able to let loose and strike quickly with a burst of energy. I could feel two hard nubs at the tips of her breasts underneath her suit rub against my stomach. Her cheek rubbed against my chest and her feelers continued to poke and prod my face, seeking out my lips especially.

Minte finally lifted her weight off me and sat up straight, but her thighs pinched around my hips and held me to the ground. Her hands reached out for the tattered hem of her body suit that was like a skirt, and she started to slowly peel it up. It was skin tight and stuck with the sweat already covering her body. Another skin tight bit of elastic fabric covered flesh around her hips like a pair of low back panties. Slowly, her stomach, navel, ribs and then breasts were exposed to the air. Pale white with a pinkish hue, her human skin was only marred with the chitinous vambraces on her forearms with attached blades and the shin guard on each leg. Behind her, the mantid abdomen seemed ready to let fly its wings. It arched back and stood fully upright behind

her back. As she pulled the suit over her head, the long sleeves and gloves covering her arms and hands slid off along with it, then she tossed it all aside. Only the bright red ribbon remained around her neck.

Her face was beet red, and she had trouble keeping eye contact; the same went for me. I was helpless to escape, but at the same time the smooth, unblemished and white skin of her stomach temped me. I unconsciously reached out and laid my hands on her hips and traced them up the curves of her waist. My hands came so close together, if they were twice the size, I might be able to touch my fingers together behind her near waspish waist. She sighed gently as my hands moved across her stomach and over her navel. When she leaned back down on top of me, my hands cupped her breasts, each B-cup fit perfectly in the palms of my hands.

Despite her erotic movements and moans and the provocative exploration of her antennae, I felt a tautness in her muscles. Her face was likewise just as tense and had barely changed at all from her usual blank expression. I felt a weight beyond just that of the girl sitting on top of me. The same pressure I felt coming from the girl over the past several days had returned. Something was bothering and tormenting her. There was still some scar present. One I just hadn't been able to see until now. My mind was getting hazy, but I forced myself to think and get beyond my libido which was quickly taking control of my senses.

Then it hit me. From memories long past. Another type of abuse that the girl had suffered through. Those memories were no doubt roiling inside her head right now. Perhaps she felt just as I did. I don't know why this keeps happening to me, I'd never consider myself a player, but I felt sincere feelings being thrust upon me by this girl, and I had no power to stop them. Something then eroded away my will to resist, and it eventually mingled with my own. I suppose that's just natural, being an animal and all that, but this girl was dealing with something even more powerful. The lust of her monstrous instincts was driving her on, but her past met it in a head on collision; the result was ugly.

I moved my hands back down her body and reached for the line of her blackish-green skin tight panties, but her hands stopped me. It was just as I expected. Her body was being pulled in two directions just like her mind. What comes after all this is something that she's only ever associated with pain, humiliation, powerlessness and suffering. This... This was the last scar.

A man has to do, what a man has to do. A man that made a promise and a conviction to see something through, has to see it through.

My hands moved away from the line; and instead, I slipped them behind and grabbed hold of her buttocks in both my hands. My hands sunk into the flesh as I pulled her further up. She moaned quietly with each caress. I moved further to her thighs and massaged them gently. I worked all around her lower half and tried to work my way closer and closer; but every time I got to the line, it was like a barrier, and her mind rejected me, and her body pushed and pulled my hands away. She was starting to become distressed. The violent swings between her eroticism and brief moments of panic were taking their toll on her.

Her tenseness was getting worse and worse as she started to squirm. I too was getting desperate. I didn't know what would happen when these two tectonic forces in her heart came to a breaking point. The more fierce and forceful I got, the worse it got, so I forced myself to move slow again. My hands moved back to her buttocks, and I curled my fingers inward between the crack to cup them fully in my hands. Her mantid abdomen bounced up and down on top of my hands as my two index fingers both touched upon something, then it went rigid and stood straight up. Minte's whole body went rigid; and as I looked up at her face, her eyes actually widened in surprise. It wasn't an expression of fear and revulsion; it was one of innocent surprise.

I went on the offensive.

Reaching for the edge of the skin tight fabric, I sunk my left hand in and grabbed hold of it. I pulled it off to the side and then traced my right hand down the smooth silk crack until I reached a puckered nub of flesh. When my finger touched it, Minte's body jolted again. My index finger was coated in sweat, and I didn't hesitate in my attack as I plunged it inside. Her flesh squeezed down tightly around the base of my finger, and I felt spongy flesh in every direction while I curled my finger and swirled it around. I didn't know what I was doing, or where I was going, but I trusted what I was seeing on Minte's face. Her pursed lips opened; she panted through her open mouth as her face slackened after the initial shock had let up. Her eyes glistened, were wet and shimmered. I dared to step it up.

My index finger swirled around, and I slipped in my middle finger. With two fingers together I pulled them back, then thrust them forward again. The mantis arced her back and grit her teeth but started panting harder. She bent back like a bow; but when the tension released, she was hanging over me and staring into my eyes with her hazy, wet and unfocused eyes. The further I went, and more aggressive I became the wetter my fingers got. A pool of lubricant began to stain her underwear from the front to the back, and her sphincter began to relax. It was then I knew the stage was finally set.

I pulled my fingers free; and while she was still stunned and out

of it, I fumbled with my jean zipper and flap of my underwear. I had long been at full attention and nearly at the point of bursting. I had trouble trying to jimmy, tuck and pull my member to freedom, but I finally released it from its cage. There was a quiet slap as my raging dick smacked against her lower cheeks, and I tried to steer and point it in the right direction. Minte's face was coming back to its senses at about the same time the tip of my glans, with guidance from my hands, found its way back to her entrance. It was already loose and ready, so it only took one daring plunge. My glans disappeared into her backside with ease. Minte let out a long erotic moan.

The pressure was unlike anything I expected. The incredibly tight muscle that was relaxed just a moment ago protested against the intrusion and pushed to try expelling it. It gripped hard on my most sensitive part just below the ridge of the glans, and I very nearly lost it all together, but I wasn't done yet. I grabbed hold of her butt with my hands and pulled her backwards while my hip pushed upward. Even though her weight was pulled down on me, her body still tried to push me away. I felt my cock bend as it explored the unknown depths and molded it into its shape. Minte's body lost all its strength and went limp; her body falling on top of mine. Along with her strength, her anus lost its resistance, and the rest of my penis slid in all the way to the base.

She was laying on top of me, her hands desperately seeking something to hold onto, found my shoulders which she squeezed tightly. The antennae on top of her head wildly sought me as well and started to caress my face and poke my lips, like it was a kiss to her. Her face buried into my chest and slid over my bandages which became increasingly wet with every drop of sweat burst out from underneath or rubbed off on me from Minte. The tightness around my base felt crushing. It was almost as if it would chop it off, but I pulled her body back with my hands cupped tightly on her ass and went with the flow of resistance from her body. Then I thrust up with my hips and pulled her back with me and started moving slowly like a piston.

Every time I moved, I felt my cock twist unnaturally, but every nerve was being stimulated from the surface to my core. Soon Minte couldn't control herself. Her quiet whimpers became moans; and when I looked down, and she looked up at me, her face was quickly becoming a mess. Her body twitched, and it took me by surprise when something tried to explode very suddenly from my loins. But the tightness around my base cause the pulse traveling down my member to come to a sudden stop. I felt a wave of pleasure and electricity run amok in my loins, but it was dry.

It drove me nuts.

Against my better judgement, I doubled and then doubled again my movements. My ejaculation had been denied, and I felt a beast

deep down inside rebel. What had been denied met with reinforcements as my scrotum tucked up and prepared to fire again. Minte's body began to slacken more and more, and it would not stop me a second time as I moved freely, in and out, at my leisure. Her face was a complete mess now. The calm, cold and stoic expression on her face had been erased. She couldn't even keep her tongue inside her mouth, and drool mixed with the sweat pooling on my chest. While quiet erotic moans escaped from her lips, I grunted bestially, pounding away at her. A slapping sound echoed off the walls of the inn and our bodies pounding against the floor.

A second pulse came up from my core, muscles in my waist quivered, my toes curled, my teeth grit and my body tensed as I slammed her whole body backward on my rod one last time. Pushing myself as deep as I could go, I felt an explosion from my loins that could not be stopped. Pulse after pulse, throb after throb as I made quick short piston motions still as deep as her body would let me be.

Minte went wild in my embrace; the moan she was smothering could not be held back any longer. Her throat let out a sweet lyrical scream of pleasure, and her back arced as though she were struck by lightning. The inside of her rectum was being painted white. I emptied everything I had then pulled myself free with a 'pop'. My erect member stood tall between her cheeks while her body quivered, and my spunk oozed out freely as her anus puckered and tried to compose itself.

Her body quivered and shook, her face equal parts overtaken by lust and an expression of wonder. Her eyes were wide as her mind was racing, trying to understand what she was experiencing.

I tentatively asked, “Minte, was that the first time you-?” A couple words were one too many, and I lost my voice.

My body went limp on the floor; her body did the same on top of me. I breathed heavily to catch my breath, but in the warm afterglow, with the sound of rain pitter-pattering against the glass window, I became aware of the cold hard floor. I scooted backward, sat upright and pressed my back against the side of the bed. I was still trying to catch my breath when two flashes of green blazed past my face. There were two thuds following a loud slicing sound. My body froze on instinct.

Beside my head, two scythes embedded themselves deep into the bed behind me. Straw and bird down seeped from the wounds like blood, and I slowly turned my head, terrified, toward the blades' owner. Minte's hands pushed off the floor, her blades swiveled freely on the points at her wrists. They hadn't even locked into place when the assassin slowly raised her lust ridden face at me. She looked back down, and I followed her gaze to my still erect penis. It still felt tender and sensitive to the cold air, and it was slightly limp, but it was alive

and kicking, and the girl stared at in longingly.

I sensed danger, but razor sharp blades were on each side of my head. My shoulders would catch on them if I stood up, so I sat there, still as helpless as before. Her body crawled across the short distance that separated the two of us, her blades still stuck in the bed, and she dropped down on top of me. Her knees pinched against my waist again, and she sat her butt down on my thighs. A trail of white was still oozing out from her when she moved her hands over her abdomen and caressed it gently.

"...Warm," She said with a bit of a slur.

My own thighs were soon drenched. Her womanhood was flowing like a broken faucet, and a pungent and sweet feminine scent brimming with pheromones wafted into my nose. Terror washed away, and my senses became fuzzy. The tenseness of her body seemed to be gone, but too much medicine can be a poison. She was out of control, but my body had already stopped listening to me.

I looked at her once again, and she was smiling. It was a wry smile, there were traces of a familiar one to it, but it was lewd as well. It was missing every trapping of the innocence it only briefly reminded me of. My unfocused gaze was interrupted by my eyes flinching again as her antennae continued to poke and caress my face. One would greedily touch and caress my lip before the other one, as if with a separate mind of its own, pushed the other aside to take its place. Then it was as if they coiled, pushed and shoved one another in a fight. In my stupor, when one slipped between my teeth, my slack jaw closed shut gently and caught one of them in my teeth. She reacted as if she had stuck it into an electrical socket. Her body convulsed, and her hands hugged herself tightly as she squirmed on top of me.

I released the feeler from my teeth, and it retreated, but only to get the hell out of the way of Minte's face which can barreling forward. Our faces pressed together, connected at the lips, but that wasn't enough for long. Her hands grabbed hold of my cheeks, and her tongue plunged forward to pin down and twirl around my own. I returned the gesture, and we were soon both greedily trying to pull one another closer. We only pulled away when we both almost ran out of breath.

Minte's hands reached out for my shoulders, and she lifted her weight off me for just a moment before she dropped back down. It happened without a word of warning, but a different wet and tight feeling enveloped my penis. Instead of pushing me away, it pulled me in and refused to let go. I felt the muscles and vaginal walls tighten and coil around me. She was so wet and loose from the bout before that she slid back all the way to my base in a single motion. A long sigh escaped her lips, and her head nearly titled backward completely

before rebounding so that her eyes could look right at me.

Her blades were still stuck in the bed, her hands were on my shoulders, so she lifted up with her legs to slide up and down my shaft. She moved slowly, much slower than before, but I was recovering quickly from her erotic display. I took the lead by sliding my shaft through my middle two fingers on my right hand, and I rested my thumb on her exposed and flushed clitoris. Another shock hit her hard. She must have felt as though she were going to float away, so her legs swept out and wrapped around my back. She held on so tightly that I didn't even feel her weight. Rocking my hips back and forth on the floor, I felt myself slip in and out. Her arms resting on my shoulder were not enough so she wrapped them around my neck and dug her fingers into my back to hold on as I continued to rock back and forth.

I felt her feelers comb through my hair as she rested her chin on my shoulder. My hips rocked back and forth faster and faster, and her whole body rose and fell with each thrust. The tightness I felt was far more orthodox, but it felt even hotter and more intense. Maybe it was because I was still so sensitive? It could have been because of the nature of her genitals. Either way, my exhaustion from before was but a distant memory as I was spurring myself closer and closer to letting loose another deluge of white. My pants became grunts; her sighs and moans reached the volume of screams of ecstasy. With my free hand, I had to cover her mouth so that the other people inside the inn wouldn't hear her. Minte's tongue snaked out from her mouth to coil and lick around my fingers when I did so.

Minte's hips were rocking back and forth in rhythm with my own. Every pulse and twitch in my nether regions started to match in harmony with the quivers within her pussy; and like waves, it all started to increase in intensity. She held tighter and tighter as I moved faster and faster until I finally reached the limit of my second wind. Like a backed up fire hose, an undulation through my member carried my seed, which fired like buckshot, inside Minte.

The heat already stirring inside her could prepare neither her nor me for what overwhelmed us both. I do not know where it all came from, but as Minte sucked and pulled on me like a vacuum, I didn't fail to deliver. She let out one last loud, muffled scream of ecstasy and nearly bit my fingers while doing so. I likewise took a deep breath and tried to control my want to let out a loud moan as pleasure ravaged my body. Like a kettle blowing steam, Minte's own body found an outlet; the membranes covering her wings flew wide open, and her two pairs of insect wings beat with a loud hum. A rush of wind pinned both of us to the ground as objects around the room were knocked over by the vibrating of her wings. When her muffled scream ended, so too did the rush of her wings which lazily went limp. Her abdomen membranes

couldn't muster the strength to fold all back into place. Her beautiful glistening wings limped on the floor.

It felt like pieces of me were flowing in her; and soon, there wasn't enough room in her vagina or womb to accept me. A pool of white seeped out from where my penis and her labia met and started to pool on the floor. We had exhausted ourselves so much that we could not even fight gravity. Minte's blades folded back onto her forearms with a snick, and then we collapsed in a heap on the floor.

I would have preferred a night's rest on a bed.... But... Oh well... With the mantis still wrapped around me, we both drifted away with the melancholic sound of rain applauding against the window pane.

***

The salamander sits in a foul mood next to the fire and pokes at it with a stick. Embers pop and fly out, many drift their way onto her, but it doesn't bother or affect her at all. She keeps looking toward the sky and watches the sun creep closer and closer to the horizon between the trees of the forest. It would be dusk soon. The fire raging on her tail has begun to outshine the camp fire as she grows more irate.

“He said he'd be back by now,” She pouts.

An anubis sits with her legs crossed atop a log near the campfire. Her eyes are closed, and a golden staff balances on top of two outstretched paws. She does not stir from her meditation, but she answers the smouldering lizard.

“Tis near dusk. Not dusk nor after.”

Leaning against a tree, some distance from the campfire, is a tall wyvern. With one wing in a sling and the other folded on top of it, she loiters in the shadows, purposefully, all in an effort to create an atmosphere to her liking. She speaks as well.

“Believe in Master. No man with that much conviction on his face when he left can fail!” She says while trying to flex and clench the talons on her uninjured wing like a fist.

The Thorn Knight sighs and readies to pout again for the umpteenth time, but her tail kicks up suddenly, and her nose sniffs the air greedily. She leaps to her feet and turns her head into the northern woods.

“Husband!” She shouts with glee.

Her crocodile eyes spot a man emerging from the woods in the exact direction she smelled him first. She runs toward him at full speed but suddenly comes to a halt in mid sprint. The man, Laven, limps and hobbles his was out of the brush but only because of something weighing him down. With arms wrapped around her husband's right arm, the assassin clings to him like a lover. So close that it makes it

difficult for him to walk at all. Rose's jaw hangs slackened, she points her claw at the mantis and screams at her.

“Hey! What do you think you're doing!”

“No, Rose. Wait, calm down! I can explain-” Laven shouts and pleads as he waves his free hand wildly.

But she's not even addressing Laven, her ire is pointed directly at the assassin.

The anubis and wyvern had also perked up at the first sign of Laven; their emotions no less than that of Rose's, but their actions were by far more restrained. When they spot the assassin clinging to Laven's arm, their faces likewise slacken with surprise. Rose, however, is far less constrained and stomps her way up to Laven and tries to stare down the mantis. Her usual flightiness and shyness which caused her to flee was not present, instead she merely hid behind Laven. Her emotionless face doesn't even flinch under the pressure of the Thorn Knight, while she ducks behind him. It starts to look like a game, as they move their faces in front and behind Laven in pursuit and fleeing of one another.

Shoshanah lets out a deep sigh, “I calculated that such a result was always possibility. There was always such a risk...” She cradles her face in the palm of her paw and mutters under her breath. “But Pharaoh, did you genuinely even attempt to avert this conclusion?”

The wyvern merely laughs jovially at the scene, oblivious and completely innocent of any deeper meaning to it. Rose seizes Laven by his left arm and clings to him just as closely. She then starts to pull him in her direction. Minte has none of it and stands her ground, resisting the salamander's pulls. The assassin presses her body even closer against Laven. This only infuriates Rose even more. Her tail erupts with the fires of jealously, and she presses in so close to Laven that his arm gets caught between her cleavage.

Poor Laven fears for his life and his arms that might tear off if the tug of war continues, so he desperately pleads for calm. One girl refuses to calm down; the other is silent but refuses to give up. Out of sight of everyone's eyes, the mantis's eyes are cast downward as she rocks back and forth while Laven is pulled to and fro. A thin and barely noticeable smile curls on her otherwise emotionless face. The antennae atop her head meet, curl inward at the tips, touch their base and bulge out at the middle.

Chapter 65.5

Between glistening spires of ivory that scrape the sky and columns of marble far older than common men can image an eternal city lies. Winding streets cut through crumbling remains of ancient structures, and buildings of wood less than a century old fester from their corpses. Over a million souls hustle and bustle behind the towering walls that reach so high that they dim dawn and dusk alike. Seven hills rise from within the walls, and seven monuments of the ancients crown them like jewels. Wallowing in the valleys, the common people toil, as they always have. It the ancient capital of the Empire, Perrsolis.

Galloping down the ancient streets, built straight and precise, a horse and rider cuts swathes through the people. The rider refuses to yield, and the people throw themselves aside lest they be trampled underneath. The golden gleam of his robes silences any protest, a man of the clergy. A black hood over his head signals to everyone that he is a man beyond reproach. He cares little for those in his way; he does not even acknowledge them. He cradles his right arm against his chest while clinging desperately to the reigns with his left. His knees kick and spur the already half mad stallion onward.

The mad rider scales the fourth hill in the south-southeast corner of the city. Crowning its summit is an ancient temple, long ago repurposed to a new god while idols and monuments to the old ones were long ago dashed to pieces. It is a huge and sprawling house of worship. Many terraces, each with its own wall, and a temple not unlike a fortress sits atop it all. In another world, at another time long gone by, a wise king could have mistake it for his own.

His ride comes to a stop at this temple's gates. The stallion rears as the dying beast huffs in distress. He slips his feet from the stirrup but stumbles off the saddle and hits the stonework. Aids rush to his side, but he throws his left arm wildly about and curses at them. They scurry away and instead calm the bucking horse and try leading it to water. The man picks himself up off the ground with his right arm held by his left. He limps up the stairs toward the palace at the very top.

Priests and priestesses of the temple clear a path for him as he doggedly pulls himself up the hundred steps. The man ignores the beautiful gardens with flowers in full bloom as though he were blind to them. A choir in the distance grows louder as he approaches the temple, but it does not reach his ears. He throws his shoulder at the doors leading into the temple with a crash, and the choir music dies. By the alter, two dozen boys practicing their hymns fall silent and look at the ragged man at the entrance. The only sound to be heard is his

echoing foot steps as he marches between the pews.

His march comes to a sudden halt when his right arm spasms, and an insidious pain rampages through his body. He hits the floor wailing in pain and grips his right arm tightly. Beneath black leather gloves and wrappings, his fingers and wrist clench and twist with a mind of their own. Tendons in his arm tense and release at random for ten seconds before it suddenly stops. The man just as quickly stops screaming and drags himself back to his feet as though nothing had happened.

That pain reminds the man of the first and second pain all over again. A flash of green and his arm is severed halfway down the forearm. Later, deep in the woods, the acidity of red slime melts and rejoins the two halves of the arm together. His hand survived, but the tendons and nerves were damaged and hardly saved at all. With great effort, he spreads his fingers apart, only to have them clench into a fist right away. He trips and nearly falls over but breaks his fall by grabbing onto the wooden pew with his right hand. When it clenches shut, the wood snaps and breaks in his grip. Splinters pierce the leather glove, but he doesn't care, nor does he feel it. He cradles his right arm in his left and stumbles down the isle, leaving a trail of blood and traumatized boys watching his every move. Each one of them is frozen in fear.

He ignores them and climbs the stairs behind the alter. Round and round he goes as he climbs to the very top and then bleeds over the rich and opulent rugs decorating the hallway. It leads to the highest and furthest room in the temple, the furthest place from entrance. Only a few dozen people in the entire world ever walk these halls. Eunuch attendants dressed in pure white robes with pale white faces approach him.

“Master Zerin?” Cries one.

The Eunuch's keen eye immediately identifies a bronze brooch holding the inquisitor's hood to his cape.

“What are you doing here?” Asks the other.

Five of them in all attempt to block his way, but he ignores them and continues.

“You cannot have an audience with the Grand Cardinal without notice!” shouts a third.

“We'll call the guards! Even on you!” Threatens the forth.

When the fifth stands directly in his path and does not move, he violently grabs the pale and thin man by the shoulder and throws him aside with ease. Inquisitor Zerin marches forward unopposed, throws open the doors at the end of the long hall and enters into the chamber of the Grand Cardinal. It is a simple room, undecorated, and very unlike the hall leading to it. A man with greying hair, sitting peacefully at his desk, gives a disinterested glance toward the savage entry of an

unexpected guest. There is an illusion of a black monolith glowing a radiant gold on his desk. A gold rune for 'five' paints the monolith; and for a brief moment, a gold rune for 'one' shines on his chest. With a whisper, all the illusions quickly evaporate into nothing.

The man's face is round; and even with Zerin's intrusion, he wears a Buddha-like smile on his face. He is a man who has nearly seen sixty winters, but his posture is flawless. He stands up to reveal a slight gut that is the only mar on an otherwise fit psyche for his age. While he steps out from behind his desk, sunlight from the open verandas illuminate the streaks of brown in his hair. Each one shows some last vestige of his stubborn youth. His sparkling emerald green eyes do the same. Despite being called the Grand Cardinal, his garbs are a simple brown robe, a bronze star amulet on a simple iron chain necklace and an iron rod tipped with yet another bronze star.

“Inquisitor Zerin, to whom do I owe the pleasure?” The Grand Cardinal's kindly baritone inquires with a smile.

Zerin does not speak a word; he continues to march ahead until he is at the Cardinal's desk. He reaches into his coat, pulls out a torn leather collar and slaps it down atop the desk with a crash. His black eye stares at the Cardinal as he wheezes hoarsely. The kind smile turns downward at the collar, a simple brown with a thick and tight chain around it. Hanging from the center is a single ornament, a small green arc. The cardinal picks it up, inspects it closely until he remembers it and then calmly places it back on the desk.

“A shame, but these must things come to pass eventually. There shall always be another to take their place among the seven.”

“No... Your holiness... Look at it closer,” Zerin wheezes.

The Cardinal ignores or does not mind Zerin's rude address and picks up the collar again.

“What are you trying to tell me, Zerin?” The cardinal asks.

“The finger marks. The pattern of the blood stains. The way it is ripped in half... I did not cut it, nor did I find it as such.”

The Cardinal continued to stare at the inquisitor with a smile, imploring him to continue with his eyes.

Zerin delivered his bombshell, “It was torn off... By its wearer.”

“What are you saying, Zerin?” The Grand Cardinal asks innocently.

The inquisitor takes a deep breath.

“The Green Reaper has gone rogue.”

The Grand Cardinal blinks. He sets the collar down on the table and then stares at Zerin skeptically. Zerin grabs hold of his right arm. His fingers curl around the leather bindings, and he starts to hyperventilate. Steeling himself, he pulls off the bindings. It is a

disgusting thing to behold. A ring of white scar tissue around his arm. Near the wound, the flesh is inflamed, abscesses and puss hide underneath, and a terrible smell is released into the air. The wound is sterile, no longer at risk of infection, but lesser men would vomit upon seeing or smelling it.

"This is what she did to me! I found her captured by 'him'. I was about to finish what she failed to do, but then she turned against me and spared... 'him'!... Then she tore her collar off with her bare hands... And gave me a message... 'I don't kill anymore. Most certainly not for you.'"

The Grand Cardinal's smile finally fades.

"She was not speaking to me." Zerin says cryptically.

The Cardinal's eyes looked to Zerin, his wound, back to the ruined collar and then to Zerin. He lets out a long sigh, turns on his heels and walks toward the veranda. The bottom of the iron rod clanks against the floor as he goes, echoing inside the spacious room. He stands at the edge of the balcony, holding his weight up by the railing. There he stares out at the capital which sprawls out before him.

Zerin watched the old man's back for some time before he cautiously approaches him. When he hears the inquisitor approach, he finally begins to speak.

"I often stand here to meditate." The Cardinal spoke toward the winds and to no one in particular. "I look upon the Hall of Records on the hill yonder. With its four ivory towers that reach for the heavens... I often find myself thinking of all the tomes within its confines. I wonder about all those still lost in the catacombs far beneath it. Thousands of years worth of lost knowledge yet to be reclaimed. Traps of all sorts, magical or not, barring the way. How many curious scholars, mercenaries and adventure seekers have they claimed? That is how valuable our past is, Inquisitor Zerin. The wonders we are capable of now are but a child's plaything to the miracles of the ancients. I often find myself thinking that... The past... To put it all into perspective."

The Inquisitor approaches the railing and looks upon the towering library on the hill with its four towers, each as large as a keep. His gaze turns back to the Cardinal whose eyes look down at the city resting in the ivory's shadow.

"Below it, one of the marketplaces. Tens of thousands of souls wander it every day. Trading, bartering, shopping. For wealth, for livelihood, for simple food and clothing. Every day the people come, and they will keep on doing so... Don't they look so small? Are not their troubles and their toils insignificant? Busying themselves with this world and not of the next? No. Not quite. They may look as ants from up here; but to them, we, all the way up here, are but the size of ants

as well. Just two specs disappearing into the background. We are just as small and insignificant under he who watches us all from the heavens. I find myself watching them and watching myself through them. It helps bring my perspective back to reality. To the present."

The Cardinal leans over slightly to look below him. Zerin, captivated by his words, does the same. He spies the temple garden that runs a full ring around the main temple from front to back. From the veranda to the flowers and stone walkways below, it is about fifty meters.

"Do you know what it is I see when I look down, Inquisitor Zerin?"

Zerin thinks and studies the face of the smiling man, but he is at a loss for words. He is about to ask what the Cardinal meant, but the words get caught in his throat, literally. The Cardinal's iron rod struck him and crushed his throat underneath it. At the same moment, the Cardinal's leg swept his legs out from under him. With one hand holding the rod against his throat and his other holding him by the scruff of his coat, the Cardinal bends the Inquisitor backward over the railing.

"Your Future, Inquisitor Zerin! Soon to be your present, if you do not. Pay. Close. ATTENTION!"

The Cardinal's smile is gone. He spits in Zerin's face with every word, nearly foaming at the mouth, his face twisting in rage.

"Have you told this to anyone else?"

Zerin heaves as he tries to talk because his life depends on talking right now, but he can't even breathe.

"Well?" The Cardinal shouts.

He pushes Zerin forward, off his feet and almost over the railing. The inquisitor shakes his head from side to side in a panic.

"Does anyone else know?"

Zerin shakes his head a second time. The Grand Cardinal releases the rod from his throat, pulls him back and throws the inquisitor back into his chamber. Zerin is unable to catch himself as he stumbles forward; his right arm doesn't have the strength to break his fall, so it crumples under him as he continues rolling, and he lands squarely on his left arm. The grown man cries out, tears up, coughs, wheezes and rolls on the floor in pain.

"You do understand the ramifications of what you're claiming, don't you?" The Cardinal asks, still seething with rage. "This is not a fifth, forth, third or even second generation... She is one of the last three from the original seven. None have done this before. NONE! They die before that. And you're telling me. She. Disobeyed. ME?"

As Zerin writhes on the floor, the Grand Cardinal walks back over to his desk and holds the collar up to study it one more time.

“One of Bishop Ciel's original seven masterpieces... An Arc Assassin... A Traitor? Everything she knows, with every skill she was taught, with each blade... Forty years... Now under the control... Of a heretic? No doubt copulating like any other base monster... WITH A HERETIC?"

The Cardinal tosses the collar against the wall, the green arc smashes into the stone and breaks in two. He walks past the squirming Zerin and heads back to the veranda. He absorbs the view; and with deep breaths, he finally calms down. Then he turns toward Zerin again.

“You're not to leave the capital. I'm never to wonder where you are, what you are doing and with whom you speak. Everything said within these walls. Will. Not. Leave. If it does... So help me, I swear by God, The Almighty, that your entrails will fertilize my garden, and your blood will water it!”

The Cardinal kneels over Zerin, and he roughly squeezes his head between his hands and forces him to look his way. His eyes dart back and forth as his mind races.

“This scandal... Cannot be known. Not while under my orders. Not when I'm the one who will be held responsible... Not until it is already too late. Not until after the Holy See convenes.”

Zerin forgets his pain for a moment, and his eyes go wide; he can hardly believe what he's hearing. The Cardinal spots Zerin's realization, and his eye refocus on him. His eyes so intense, he might burn a hole right through the man.

“Yes. You heard me correctly. After a thousand years we will elect a new Pontiff. A position that has been empty in remembrance of Matriarch Elsia II; the woman who bravely scarified her body, mind and soul for a miracle that would bring about the Battle of Celreulian. A title which grants the right to hear the word of our Almighty just as clearly as you hear my voice now. It has to be this way, Zerin. The Emperor is infirm. His sons strut like impotent roosters and are poised to pluck each other's eyes out while the Empire is on the verge of civil disorder. The traitor hero did not give us peace, Zerin. He only gave us a ceasefire. When his whore's minions smell blood in the water, they will emerge from the shadows they have hidden in and they will descend upon the Empire like vultures. If the Empire falls, can the other nations, still piecing themselves back together survive? No. Humanity won't last another decade. It needs strength. It needs unity. It needs the word and guidance of our lord who in his mercy saved us once before!”

The Grand Cardinal releases Zerin from his grip and stands back up to loom over the Inquisitor.

“And you'll stay here and help make sure that man is me. There is no one else more suited. No one else who has worked so

hard and sacrificed so much... When I am Patriarch, I will make you High Lord Inquisitor Zerin. Then you can use every right and privilege that comes with it to avenge your grievances. What do you say to that?”

Zerin eyes unfocused and rolled into the back of his head for a moment as he digests the offer. When he returns to reality. He looks up and smiles a wicked smile.

“By your will, your holiness.”

“That's 'Patriarch Ol'een the First' to you, Inquisitor Zerin.”

Epilogue: Before Dinner Mint

A few motes of dust danced in a sunbeam before my eyes. They floated about between the hustle and bustle of several people as I sat there with my back against the wall. I was limp and tired beyond coherent explanation. The amount of comfort I got out of a simple chair was a bit troubling. It had been about a week since I had last graciously parked myself on top of polished wood. My memory was full of nothing but stumps, hard cold ground and filthy dirt. Daylight, starlight, clouds, leaves: these were the only things I could recall whenever I looked up. Now I focused my weary eyes on the intricate latticework of wooden crossbeams holding the roof of this tavern up.

If you spend too much time roughing it, you start to develop a distinctive appreciation for the simple things of civilized life.

"Hoowee~", Rose cried out as she stretched her arms behind her head, "This is just about what I needed."

I lowered my head and out of the clouds and saw the three girls seated around the square dining table. Rose was seated on the opposite side. She was leaning back on her chair and her talons resting on the table. Shoshanah sat on my left with an irritable tic in her eye directed at Rose. She did her best to suppress it, but she was gradually losing her composure. Chris was absorbed in something else entirely. She was silent, but preoccupied with fumbling through a thin paper menu between her wings' forearm talons. It was starting to tear and the edges were rolling. I felt a pang of guilt watching it because printed paper wasn't something you could buy by the box at an office supply store.

Shoshanah finally slammed her paw on the table. A few patrons seated at the surrounding tables jumped and looked over, but they quickly looked away because they were desperate to not get involved.

"We took great risk and ventured to this restaurant to relax our weary bodies. Can you at the very least exercise a modicum of restraint and cease spoiling my appetite by shoving your filthy leathery soles in my face?" the anubis barked.

"Yeah, like you said. We're here to relax, so why don't you get on that?"

Shoshanah didn't dial back her glower one bit.

That's right. Our journey had become a meandering detour through the rugged fringes of civilization. We had little other choice. A skirmish here and there wasn't something we couldn't handle. The full attention of the Church was a whole other matter; especially after I might have caused one of their agents to go rogue. Now she seemed to be following me and I couldn't exactly explain why.

No. That's too mule headed even for me. She was onto me like a bee to a garden. The girl hovered around, never further away than my whisper could reach. She'd return sure as shooting when she was called; the girl also seemed to know when she was needed... Or was it only whenever she felt like it? She had a habit of just showing up out of the blue without anything to say. Then she'd hang around and vanish for another couple hours or so. I wasn't sure what to make of the girl. Her lack of expression made her a puzzle I couldn't solve. It didn't help that she was very articulate either; the girl hardly spoke.

Now that I thought about it, she hadn't shown her face for some time today.

That memory of her coming onto me at that inn in the city kept coming back to me. It was... An experience, to say the least. That assassin had a certain intensity to her that always showed on her face, but I had been caught off guard in that brief moment of passion she showed me. Emotion wasn't something I expected from her. A straight lip and furrowed brows was all you could safely bet on. Maybe, just maybe, you could catch a frown and knit forehead as she thought about something. But that was it. So when she did become aggressive, it blindsided me. I ended up getting swept along. Again.

I turned back to the ruckus getting louder in front of me. Rose was either trying very hard to ignore Susan, or she had a natural and effortless aptitude for it. The anubis' mean glares got more and more furious, but Rose remained unflustered. Shoshanah was relentless though, and eventually Rose would have to cave in a little.

“What? I wiped them clean on the way in. What do you want from me?” Rose said indignantly.

I sighed and turned away again. What is it that I want? I thought that to myself. Yes, I couldn't afford to continue drifting along on the wind. We all couldn't afford to keep hiding and scurrying away. My pride might catch up with me one day, but I'd sooner fear that there was also danger in being too cautious. If we were already being tracked and followed, it only made it easier to catch us if we foot slogging through the forest all the time.

Rose was defiant and crossed one leg over the other as leaned further back in her chair. If it were not for her tail slipped through the rails of the chair she would certainly have fallen over backward by now. The flames crackling on the ridge was more violent than the hearth in the corner and it made a few people nervous as it slithered back and forth along the vulnerable wooden floor. She paid them no mind, but she opened one eye and looked at Shoshanah with a look of indifference.

“What? I wiped them clean on the way in. What do you want from me?”

Those two wouldn't stop any time soon, so I turned over to Chris who was still having problems with the menu.

"You going to be okay there, Chris?"

Even with the scarf wrapped around her mouth I could see the frown she was making. She also didn't answer. I leaned over and reached out with a helping hand.

"Chris? When the waitress comes back, it will be the third time we asked for more-"

"I am quite alright, sir," she said with her eyes still focused on the menu with laser precision, "I must overcome this puzzle myself. I would fail to grow if I gave in now."

The tone in her voice gave me pause and I retreated, albeit reluctantly. She was doing her best to keep the menu between her face and me. It was just a passing thought to step inside here for a drink and a meal. Now I was actually starting to get a couple hunger pangs. My hand clumsily nicked a knife as I withdrew. It rang once as it bounced off my chair and then ricocheted underneath the table.

Great. Now I was starting to get lightheaded too.

I lifted the white linen table cloth, looked underneath the table and saw Minte. She was sitting dead center under the table with her knees tucked up to her chest. Her eyes were staring dead ahead and right into my own. I paused again. The clatter, rustling and banter above me faded away. An awkward atmosphere settled in and my lazy tired thoughts shifted gears suddenly. How the hell did she even get in here and under the table without any of us noticing?

The girl slowly lifted a knife into my line of sight. I still had a little residual panic left in me when seeing that expression on her face and a sharp object all at once. It was just the dinner knife I had dropped. There was no way that blunt harmless scrap of metal was anything to worry about... Especially when you looked a little to the left or right and saw those long and vicious arm blades tucked away against her biceps

There was another awkward moment of silence as she slowly held the handle toward me. I cautiously reached out and took the knife back from her.

"Laven?" Shoshanah's voice called out.

She caught me off guard and I jumped a little. The back of my head bumped against the underside of the table, but I managed to recover and come back up topside. That bump and clatter which shook the table got the attention of all the girls.

"-You okay?" Rose asked.

"Yeah. Fine. Everything is fine. Just went to grab the knife I dropped.

"Laven, there is no need, we shall have it replaced," Shoshanah said as began to turn and look for a waitress to call over, "-

there is no excuse needed to eat with a dirty-"

"What did I tell you 'bout relaxing," Rose groaned, "Ten second rule applies."

Actually, it didn't even hit the floor. I only heard it bounce off the chair and not the ground.

"Ten second what?" Shoshanah gasped, disbelieving what she was hearing, "You may very well be a savage, but I for one will not abide Laven eating with grime encrusted cutlery!"

Okay. Good. I seemed to be the only one who noticed that little discrepancy. Those two were already back at each other's throat. I don't want to begin thinking about the ruckus Minte would cause if everyone noticed she had been hiding under the table since- well... I don't know when.

It was still bothering me though. I couldn't get my mind off of it. What the hell was that girl doing down there? If she wanted to sit at the table with everyone, I think they would let her. Had the girl wanted to kill me, she certainly had more than enough chances. Rose had sensed her intent to kill, somehow, but she was as relaxed as could be right now. There wasn't danger anywhere near, so I couldn't help but flip the linen cloth up one more time. And there was Minte's face, staring right up at me. My heart skipped a beat and I dropped the cloth back down.

"Drop something else?" Rose asked, ignoring the fuming anubis.

All three looked over at me again. I grabbed hold of my knife and fork and clacked their bottoms against the tabletop.

"N-no. Not at all. They're right here."

I put on the best smile I could, but it came out awkward as could be. I knew it. Luckily, the three girls took my word for it and retreated back into their own little worlds. Rose and Shoshanah's little spat had petered out and our waitress still hadn't returned.

Minte could very well have disappeared the second I had looked. She could have done it a third time too. It was like peering into Schrodinger's box. But I didn't have to look a third time. Something touched my thigh. My muscles spasmed and I shivered all over. At least no one else saw that one. Once my initial shock subsided, I realized that only fingers had that kind of dexterity. Very small fingers that softly massaged the stiff but tender muscles on both my thighs. I could feel it through the denim of my jeans, the tips of some feminine fingers applying pressure and the warmth from someone's palms caressing me.

Jumping up and out of my chair may have been my first reaction, but I felt pinned to the chair. I nervously studied everyone else around, the girls were still absorbed in their own troubles and the

other tavern patrons couldn't care less. The longer I ignored the problem, the more daring the fingers got. The fingers reached where my legs met my hips. I felt those fingers trace around the bulge of my groin and that was when I couldn't suppress a guttural sound that escaped from my nose.

The eyes of all three girls turned on me at once and they dropped what they were doing. I stretched my arms above my head and let our a pathetically fake yawn.

"Oh man~... Oh, sorry, just stretching a bit."

That seemed to convince them and after seeing I was alright, they went back to their previous engagements. The fingers got bolder, Minte was getting bolder. They were no longer satisfied caressing the ever growing lump between my legs, so the fingers found my zipper. The teeth of the zipper on my jeans came undone exasperatingly slowly, tooth by tooth. Now I could feel the smooth silky texture of those fingers as they glided past and into the folds of my underwear.

"Whoa! Wait!" I cried out.

All three girls and a few other nearby tavern patrons looked my way. I went red in the face instantly.

"What?" Rose pouted, "You don't want appetizers?"

Chris also sounded concerned, "Plates of spiced chicken legs and wings..."

I flailed and waved my hands in front of my face.

"Oh? No. Sorry. You said hold off on the honey glazed right?" I laughed nervously, "Ha ha ha. I wouldn't be too happy if you left those out. Ha ha."

"Honey glazed?" Rose's repeated with her eyes widening and her palate salivating, "How did we miss that?"

"Let me check," Chris said, going back to fumbling with the menu.

That would take some time. My eyes shifted left and met with Shoshanah who had been staring silently at me for some time. I was still red in the face, so when I looked at her like that her face also flushed. She quickly turned away. When the crisis was averted, the feeling of heat and humidity which had been building up in my loins bubbled back up. but the heat and touch from those hands shocked me like having a bucket of ice water dumped on my head.

I bit my lower lip to stop making a sound and luckily no one caught me this time. Now those fingers gently wrapped themselves around my half erect dick and pulled it free and into the chilly air. Minte's hands were so small and delicate that they couldn't wrap themselves completely around it. That didn't stop her from tracing her fingers gently up and down and all around the shaft and head. It was a merciless unending taunt as she stopped just short of taking a firm

grip. Then her fingers pulled back.

My breathing was heavy by now. I kept my mouth open and slacked-jawed so that the wheeze of air through my nose wouldn't alert anyone. The scene I imagined if any of these girls came over or peeked under the table was a disaster. It kept me petrified. At the same time, I felt a voice screaming in the back of my head which protested the girl let go. I was completely rock hard now, so I felt it when a new sensation grazed against my penis. Two long hard and flexible fingers. It didn't take me long to figure it out. I slowly and cautiously lifted the linen table cloth again.

There I saw Minte. Her green, limber and smooth chitinous antennae were gliding over the surface of my penis from head to base. She had withdrawn her hands which were now between her own thighs. My ears cut through all the white noise and I could hear the subtle schlick. If that wasn't enough of an auditory cue, I spied the wetness trickling down her bare thighs from underneath the hem of her tattered skirt and the small pool of viscous clear fluid on the ground right underneath her.

I was speechless. Of course she'd do something like that though. Those antennae of hers had some serious nerve endings in them. There was a sense to them stronger than just scent, hearing and touch. Her lips were slightly parted as she also began breathing a little heavy. The girl's eyes had gone a little dull as though she were in a trance. That face of hers was virtually unchanged, but now that expressionless face was flushed red. Sweat, pheromones, everything down there she was sniffing and feeling. It was turning her on and making her lightheaded as well. Her antennae got more aggressive and started to put a little pressure as they clamped my member between them and coiled around it the best she could.

Finally she stopped. I wasn't sure if it was because she was satisfied, or because she couldn't hold back any more... It was the latter. A new feeling touched against the very tip of my dick. It was soft, but it was also slimy. Her fingers wrapped themselves tightly against the base of my shaft and that warm and wet feeling slowly traced over my entire glans. When a trickle of pre leaked out, a tongue licked across and every nerve from my loins to the entirety of my hips shuddered. When I looked down again, I saw the Minte's brown haired head peek out from under the cloth and I watched, slowly but surely, as my half of my dick vanished into her mouth.

I could feel her yellow compound eyes looking at me, watching me. Every time my composure broke down, she intensified on what she was doing at that particular spot. Her head pulled back, my penis now slick with her saliva, and she grabbed hold of it in her hands and started to knead. Her fingers moved back and forth in a piston motion.

One hand would grab tighter than the other and then switch. Minte's grip twisted as one hand curled counter clockwise and the other clockwise. As her hands were busy, her lips returned and wrapped around my glans. Her slick petite tongue returned and slid over the soft tissuey membrane that was now locked in by her lips which teased and clamped down harder around my most sensitive spot.

That's when I felt like I'd fall over. I grabbed hold of the table to hold on for dear life. It wasn't something the other girls could ignore.

Shoshanah had been glancing over every so often for a while now and asked, “Laven, your face is flushed. Are you alright? Perchance you need a place to lay down and recuperate?”

“No!” I said abruptly with a squeak in my voice. “Everything is fine!”

The color from my face nearly drained when she appeared ready to get up from her seat and check my temperature despite my protests, but I was saved when some an older man dressed in grubby farmer's clothes bumbled in through the front entrance with an announcement.

“Hey, everyone! They're gonna start the eating contest for the planting festival. Got a couple minutes left to pay up and take part.”

Chris' head perked up.

“Contest?”

All four of the legs on Rose's chair slammed back down onto the floor. Her head turned around toward the door.

“Eating?”

“Winner gets their weight in food and ale!” The old man announced jovially to the whole tavern.

There was quite a crowd outside now that the door was swung wide open. I don't remember anything about- The absolute silence happening between my legs let out the first slip of noise. A quick slurp that escaped Minte's lips caused my strength to leave my body for a moment and I had to brace myself with my elbows on the table.

“Weight in food?” Chris repeated.

She looked over at the Salamander whose eyes had lit up as well.

“Then I shall participate. We'll have enough free food from here to-”

“Oh no. I don't think so girly,” Rose said with a wry smile.

The wyvern and salamander glared at one another. Both of them made their move at the same time. They kicked off their chairs and fought to beat one another to the door. That just left Shoshanah and I at the table... And Minte underneath whom the anubis was still oblivious too... If there was anyone who'd freak out about what was going on, it would be her. She was distracted for now while she

watched those two girls nearly tackle one another as they clamored to be the first outside, but then she turned back to me and put her concerned expression back on.

"Are you quite certain you have not fallen ill, Laven? These nights have been rather brisk as of late. Perhaps you have been afflicted with a case of-"

"No, quite alright. Honest!" I squeaked again.

That didn't help at all. My heart beat faster when she slowly pushed back her chair and stood up. She turned toward me, then her face titled in concert with her ears that twitched. Shit. They heard something. Minte was getting more aggressive underneath the table and making some noise now too.

"Entry fee a bit more than I expected," I heard Rose's voice say from out of nowhere.

The salamander had snuck back in from somewhere at some point. With a dagger in her claws, she cut Susan's coin purse loose. She tossed it up into the air a bit to hear the coins inside jingle, then without another word ran off and out of the tavern. Shoshanah didn't even have a second to respond of get anything more than a short 'huh?' out. Once she realized she had been robbed by Rose, her paws clenched up into fists and her face contorted in rage.

"Rose!" She howled, "Mind your own budget!" The anubis spun around, growled and hunched over with a predatory glint in her eye, "Give that back!"

As the three girls sped off I felt my body relax, but that was probably a bad idea. When Minte next moved her hands, lips and tongue, I was caught off guard and couldn't hold back. Something was coming and I couldn't stop it now. My hands pulled back and I grabbed hold of Minte's head when I felt as though I'd fall over backwards. I grabbed hold of the girl's antennae which was the one thing I shouldn't have. It was as good as any erogenous zone so far as the girl was concerned, her whole body shook. With one hand pressed up against my pelvis and fingers wrapped around my base, her other hand was back between her legs where she delved deep. My body moved on its own and I pulled her head toward me. She had only been working the top half, but now I felt my whole cock slide twist and go down her throat.

Minte nearly choked and her eyes went wide when the pressure building up inside me finally gave way and a torrent of spunk flew down and splattered her esophagus and painted it white. I doubled over and nearly hit my forehead on the table, Minte gagged, but she did not pull away as she moaned along with every spurt of cum sliding down her throat. When everything that I had backed up was spent, I finally let go of her head and she released me as well. My dick

was still wet and slick, but not a drop had been spilled.

I pushed myself off the table and leaned back in my chair. My eyes looked around in a half daze and I saw a few other men and women around the tavern who had not left to see the festival give me suspicious glances. Perhaps they were worried that I looked so disheveled? Maybe they knew something was up and they were trying to mind their own business yet curiosity got the better of them? I wasn't in the right mind to care.

Until I felt a weight on me.

My eyes opened again and Minte had revealed herself at last from under the table and took a seat on my lap. The girl was light, so that wasn't a problem. She wasn't showing me her face though. Her mantid abdomen was in the way though. It was pressed up against her back and therefore I could feel it press up against my chest. The texture was tense, but it felt alive. It was warm and I could feel something stir underneath as those insect wings of hers stirred restlessly hidden away by protective lays of chitin.

I couldn't hide my bewilderment “Minte?”

She didn't respond.

“What are you doing?” I asked again.

I hissed quietly with the first coherent moment of thought I had left.

She still said nothing. The girl's response was to wriggle her body closer to mine. I could feel all her body heat as she stuck to me as though there were a sticky fly trap stuck to my chest. My mind descended back into chaos when I felt my pant legs get wet. There was something rubbing against my thighs and it wasn't her underwear. I could feel the folds give way as they rubbed against the rough denim of my jeans. Minte was drenching my lap and it wasn't long until the unfettered scent coming from her nethers wafted upward. My heart had just calmed down and I had caught my breath, now it was all starting again.

As Minte's body pressed up against me, she also squished my recovering penis against my stomach. It was supported and held tight within two folds of soft flesh. My dick had been buried in her cheeks and trapped. That feeling alone was almost as intense as before, so when she started to rock her hips a bit it caused me to shudder again.

The girl's sudden appearance had already gotten the attention of others in the tavern. Her sitting on my lap like this was just another oddity to add to that. No one could see our hips since the table was in the way, but I was left to wonder if her movements were giving it all away. I still couldn't see the expression on her face and if it had changed, or if her movements were subtle. They weren't to me. I could feel every time she budged even just a bit. When she didn't move her

hips, I could feel every time she clenched her buttocks and it pinched my cock not so differently from her hands. It was just a lot softer. A lot warmer too.

That's about when the waitress finally returned. She was an older portly woman in an apron and muddy brown dress with her hair tied up and hidden behind a bandanna.

“Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd need a table for five... Or where did your friends go.”

I peered over Minte's shoulder and answered the woman, “They heard about the festival so they went off to take look. And don't worry about the table. Can we just get some wings out here?”

Minte did not stop even with the woman standing at the end of the table. She kept backing up and putting pressure on my dick and letting it hot-dog between her ample cheeks.

“How about the misses? Do you need anything?”

“I already ate,” Minte said quietly with a disinterested voice and straight face.

I seethed and went a brighter shade of red.

“Are you alright, sir?” The woman asked, leaning a bit closer.

“Yeah. Just hungry. That's all!” I said, accidentally raising my voice.

She gave Minte a few glances every so often, but the look on that woman's face told me she didn't see anything she thought was out of the ordinary. It was me that she looked at with suspicion. That was until I nearly yelled at her when I raised me voice. She took it for a rebuke and backed away. The kind old waitresses bowed and asked for forgiveness while retreating toward the kitchen.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but then groaned. Minte lifted off my lap and sat back down. Now she was sitting on top of my penis; the tip of which was sticking out between her thighs. I could feel the wet lubricated folds of her pussy on the top of my shaft. It felt like warm honey was being poured on it as it slid over the surface. And the smell... Too many pheromones. My mind was starting to go-

Minte rocked those hips back and forth. Her lower lips slipped and parted over the base of my penis while her thighs clenched down on the rest and squished my glans between them. This time I couldn't suppress my moan. That only spurred the assassin on further. Every sound I made got her more excited. She never let out so much as a whisper. There was only the schlick where our genitals met. I couldn't take it anymore. My body had been plastered to the chair all this time, so I moved my hips just once. The head of my penis slipped between her pussy folds.

The girl made the first sound she had after all this time. My

hands moved on their own to cover her mouth and stifle the moan, but I thought that would be harder to explain than just the moan, so I pulled them away just in time when a few patrons looked over at our table. Perhaps they thought we were just flirting before, but now that Minte was hunched over and breathing heavily, they probably couldn't write it off like that anymore. They still looked away, but now they were visibly flustered a bit. Neither could they stop from looking back over their shoulders now and then. At the same time, there was just enough plausible deniability. They couldn't just point it out.

I had caught the girl off guard, but now it was Minte's turn to strike back. She lifted her hips and sat back down straight onto my cock. My head had been squeezed between her quivering entrance, but now I felt the full force of her folds, inside and out, grip me tight. I grit my teeth tight and breathed heavily through my nose. Letting out a groan or moan would be much louder. Minte felt the same way, she was shivering like crazy, but she managed to keep dead silent. We stayed like that for a moment, but Minte couldn't be restrained for long.

The usually aloof Minte became a little wild. Her movements were still subtle, not enough to catch the attention of anyone from the corner of their eye. Her hands grabbed hold of the table's underside. She used it as leverage to keep me pin to the chair while she lifted her self up every so slightly and then dropped back down. The whole time most of her movement came from when she ground her hips around in a circle or left and right. Idle hands are the devil's play thing and since they were dangling limply at my side, they caught hold of her butt from underneath. My fingers sunk into the soft muscly flesh. I pushed up with my hands as she pushed down on me. Every time I massaged my fingers into her backside, she let out another sweet moan.

All the other people in the tavern had been at the forefront of my thoughts, but that was starting to go now. I'd move if I could, but Minte wasn't allowing it. She was keeping me still while she moved quietly, but as wildly as she could. I could feel my dick twist and turn around inside her as she moved. I could also feel the rough patches and sensitive areas of her insides that tweaked and rubbed against me. All of that excess honey pouring out from where we met was staining the chair I was seated on. It didn't stop. Minte continued to squirt a bit as she shuddered, enduring a minor orgasm silently. She still didn't stop.

Minte picked up the pace. I could feel my member begin to twitch inside her and I know she could feel it too. The very thought that I was coming to my limit let slip another moan from her lips. It was quiet, no more than a whisper. My eyes other senses were too dull to notice or care about any of the other people in the tavern now, but it looked as though they had already moved on from the oddity of the

monster seated on my lap.

I reached my final limit. Minte lifted her hips up all the way once, and only once, then dropped back down. That full stroke was all I could take and when she came harder the second time, the convulsions rampaging inside her and milked me harder than before. I was reloaded and my second package tucked up inside my scrotum and then blasted itself out until it oozed into Minte's insides. I whited out, I wasn't sure if anyone was watching. My face was certainly a mess and from Minte's quiet moans of ecstasy, she had to look the same. Her mantid abdomen tried to open and her wings attempted to buzz, but they were trapped against my chest. She squirmed and rocked back and forth and I couldn't even give one single care about the blades rising up from her shoulders that were dangerously near my head as she writhed on top of me.

Spurt after spurt that kept coming as though I were reliving my number one inside her didn't quit. I let out even more into her vagina than I did down her throat. A new fluid seeped out. It trickled down our thighs, to the chair and onto the floor. Her small body couldn't hold it all in her. We kept connected and neither of us had the strength to separate. Our bodies went limp. The only thing holding up was the chair which was up against the wall. My arms were wrapped around her waist to keep her from falling off.

Everything I had backed up was released at last. There was a warm after glow as we waited there. But through my closed eyes, I could hear someone approach.

“Sorry about the date,” the round old waitress said.

Sorry about the what?

I opened my eyes and saw the old woman standing there. Or I thought it was. A round woman was there alright, but there was a giant withered raisin there instead of where her head should- Wait, where the fuck am I? Why are we in town? No one seems to care that there are monsters in-

***

My eyes shot open wide. My head lifted up, but the rest of my body was still numb, unresponsive. A tingling sensation that was slightly painful coursed through my whole body as though it were all asleep and my circulation was a mess. I looked up and saw the millions upon millions of strange stars in patterns unrecognizable to me. Crickets chirped in the distance and all that was left of a fireplace a stone's toss away smoldered weakly.

Just a dream. People with fruit for heads and- Minte. I looked down and say that my body wasn't numb for a reason. There was something bulging out from underneath my blanket. There was something weight down on me too. I slowly lifted it up and I saw a

yellow glint in the faint moon and starlight. A head of brown hair with a streak of green. A rush of cold hair caused the girl to shiver and cling even tighter to me than before. Her cheek, slightly drooling on my chest, rubbed against me and her arms clung onto me tighter than before.

It was Minte. She had at some point snuck under my blankets and laid down on top of me. I was at a loss for words. She had been hanging around the fringes for days like some sort of shy stray cat. Why would she now... Forget it. I was about to shake her awake, but the best I could do was put my hand on her head. She buried her cheek a little harder into my chest in response and- there was a softening of her expression and... a faint smile on her face.

I didn't have it in me to do anything at all. I lowered my head back down on the makeshift pillow and stared back up into the night sky. The girl had gone through enough. If this is what she needed right now to pick up all the pieces and put herself back together... I could do that. A little numbness isn't anything... The invasion of personal spaces. No. It's alright.

Except now I noticed my pants were a little tight... and wet... Wait. I remember a bit of what I saw in that dream I had. Minte... She... Wait. No. She didn't while I was- Did she?

I lifted my head back up and raised the blanket again. Minte was still sleeping soundly with the faintest smile on her face. The antennae twisted freely; poking against my body and cheeks with a mind of their own.

Well- No. Forget it... I'll just... Change in the morning.

Epilogue: Take Two and You're Sore in the Morning

"Ouch, watch it!" I cried and winced in pain.

Susan's paw pad glided over the top of my head, tussling my dirt enriched hair, and revealed a sizable bump.

"Mayhap, if you ceased entertaining that barbarian's challenges, you would not need endure the pain of my cures," Shoshanah replied.

Her eyes stayed solely on my injury and her voice, bereft of proper bedside manners, remained cold and aloof. The twin tattoos on her stomach changed from their usual white to green and that healing glow encased her paw in a likewise green aura. It worked its magic like an icepack and dulled the pain by slowly removing the swelling.

I had caught one good overhead strike from Rose during our most recent training session that ended about five minutes ago. She broke the whole branch over my head after I feel hook line and sinker for an obvious feint. The girl was a ruthless teacher... calling her a teacher may be too generous. Rose's lesson plans, her whole philosophy, was a sink or swim and learn by experience and through pain. Susan did have one thing wrong though.

"She didn't challenge me, I'm the one who asked to spar," I retorted.

"Tis true. Yet only true for the first lesson. All other times, tis her who pulls at your sleeve like a petulant child for another bout."

"She gets less hits each time, so it's worth it in the end," I said with minute conviction. "It will pay off."

Eventually I hope, I thought quietly to myself.

"And until such a time you ascertain your confidence, you shall continue abusing the readiness of my services?" the Anubis sulked. "I sense a deplorable lack of gratitude."

The hum from her hand lost nearly all its intensity and green glow surrounding her paw nearly vanished, and along with it the soothing pain killing relief.

"Ow ow ow ow, okay okay okay," I shuddered. "I give! Thank you, Shoshanah! You're a god send, Shoshanah!"

The lump had almost sunk back into my scalp, but the sudden cut-off of healing magics caused it to quickly expand once again.

"Hmph," Susan pouted.

It had been good enough for her, because she reapplied that sweet healing magic once more and poured that it on until the lump on top of my head retreated entirely.

I breathed a sigh of relief, "Much better~ I think I'll be good now."

"Hmmmm."

That pondering hum didn't sound good. It didn't look good when I turned and saw her red eyes glaring straight into my own. My lower lip twitched.

“Laven... It has been too long since I last properly examined you and performed and thorough and proper checkup.”

Crap.

“I-I was thinking of just sleeping it off while I had the chance. Rose went off hunting with Minte and they won’t be back for another hour or so... So I thought— “

“Take it off,” Susan commanded.

A glint of red sparkled in her eye. My hands moved to the back collar of my shirt. Not under any compulsion, but out fear that noncompliance might lead to that. I sunk my neck into my chest and sat as still as I could, bracing myself on the tree stump I used as a stool. Her eyes picked out what I feared they'd hone in on. Along my arms, and a couple on my chest, were light bite marks where Rose had gently sunk her teeth into.

“Training were we?” Susan's said, her voice filled with barely tempered fury.

Her tail bristled, her foot paws dug into the ground and her hands creaked as they clenched into furry fists. Her brown skin flushed a deeper shade of red around her cheeks and it spread to the whites of her eyes... I think I spied a vein pop out on her forehead too.

“W-well, we locked grip at one point. She knocked me down, but I held on and brought her down with me. The t-two of us rolled about a bit, see?” I began to stutter and sound off with rapid succession.

Susan's reach and grip lashed out quicker than I could react with my sore and tired muscles. She grabbed hold of me by the shoulder and head, then she pulled my head out of my torso to reveal a series of telltale hickies along my clavicle. My voice died in my throat. Rose's flames were one thing, but the cold bitter flames of jealously washing over me from Susan right now led to a whole other type of burn.

“I know what you're thinking. These are pretty nasty bruises, I know.”

I rolled for bluff. Susan bared her teeth and spoke. Loudly. And Clearly.

“TRAINING WERE WE?”

I opted to stop talking. Maybe playing possum would work. She might hunt based on sight and movement. Her scarlet eyes burrowed into and stabbed me like a hot poker. But she eventually sighed in much the same way red hot iron hisses when submerged into a cooling tank. Rather than throttle me with her paws, they reached out

and touched my chest. The pad of her paws slid over my pectorals, up to my shoulders, down to my triceps and then back to my chest again. Her tattoos weren't glowing, nor did her hands glow green with healing magic...

"Uh, Susan?"

"Shh," she hushed me immediately.

She was still mad, right? I dared another look and her face definitely glowed a deep shade of red. Her eyes had lost their intensity though. She bit her lower lip for a second there too. That subtle sign of body language caused me to invulnerably gulp.

"...You assured me, the two of you, that would but train," Susan sulked.

"We were!" I said a little too quickly and a little too loudly.

"So I took my eyes off you two, so I could pray and meditate."

"And we used that time to train."

She leaned over and her small dainty nose took a couple whiffs next to my chest. I was sweating now. Next, she licked my chest; the slimy warm feeling of her tongue against my bare skin nearly caused me to leap off my stool. I might have, but she pushed me back down, sternly.

"This is not dried sweat," She declared.

If she tried that again, she'd find a different result. Because now I was sweating bullets. At least not too much anger smouldered in her eyes when she looked back up me this time. There lay a certain mystery to what the look on those eyes meant. Soft, moist, devoid of anger, yet gazing into me and looking for something. Shoshanah turned her head and pressed the white fluff from her canine ear against my chest, like a makeshift stethoscope.

"I— "

"Shhhh," She hushed me again while raising a single claw from her paw in front of my face.

That claw made its way over to my chest where it traced a circle around my abdomen, right at my diaphragm... Right... That's where I very nearly got blown in half by that crazy sorceress. Of course she'd inspect that place if she were doing a checkup. That's only natural. If I didn't already feel one hundred percent and that feeling of burning away from the inside were not a distant surreal memory I could no recall, I'd be concerned about it too... So that's why her tail would start wagging behind her like that, oh, and it'd be why her claw would start to migrate down toward my belt loop and—

"Aren't we too old to be playing Doctor?" a voice called out from above.

Susan and I froze together. We looked up at the same time and

were greeted by a mess of pink hair, green sweptback horns and a wide grin, all of it hanging upside down and but a scant thirty centimeters above our heads.

"Ah!" the same sound of surprise escaped from our opened mouths.

"HA HA HA HA!" the figured bellowed merrily, arms crossed over her chest.

And then she descended quickly from the canopy. She somersaulted once before her talons slammed into the earth and shook it violently. Ground broke and rocks cracked under her weight, the hard packed soil and stones breaking against her hard scales. Her released cloud of dust which overwhelmed us two hapless bystanders who were sent into a coughing fit.

A silhouette, like a mighty spruce tree standing upright, turned to face us. It appeared as though a cape covered her like a vampire, which then cast outward to dispel the cloud of dust and debris with a simple gust of wind. That cape was actually a wing and part of the girl's arm. Only one girl fit the description in both in form and action: Chris.

Susan stood up first, but only to push me back down by the shoulder when I tried to as well. That only made the towering figure seem more imposing. A swish of her long and powerful tail sliced through the air and Chris, all two hundred plus centimeters of her loomed over us both.

A tattered white cloth, wrapped as a twin tailed scarf around her neck, fluttered dramatically in the breeze. Her heroic stance complimented itself with her arm's fore talons resting valiantly against her hips. The girl's massive bust heaved and bounced a couple more times before coming to rest and the wyvern girl's leathery wing membranes folded nearly underneath her arms and off behind her.

"Were you not currently preoccupied with your patrol?" Susan asked, a tone of suspicion in her voice.

"My eyes see far, further than evil in vain should flee. I could finish a such a simple patrol it in half the time still... With one eye closed!" Chris boasted. "But instead, I see you two, alone, again."

Again. The inflection she put on that word rubbed me the wrong way. Chris spoke with her usual deep and heroic voice, but that act of hers faltered a bit there. She let of that kind of tell, along with her eyes narrowing toward Susan. The anubis quickly scraped together her poker face. A professional would have rated it highly.

"Tis merely a routine health checkup... You should be fully aware that Laven is not built from the same indomitable building blocks that you are."

"Hmmm? That so? He looks stiff to me."

There's that tone again. Chris wasn't playing dumb like she

normally does... Or she decided to play the role of cool headed detective instead. Either way, I think she connected a few dots. Right now, and the last time Susan got hot and heavy like this after healing me... Alone in the woods... Oh god...

Chris strode around to our rear, behind me and clamped down on my shoulders with her forearm talons. A huge weight pressed down on me and left me with the feeling that trying to stand up or slink away would be met with resistance. That is to also neglect that the tips of those claws were razor sharp, the smooth cuticles before the metal rending hooks rest firmly against my now tense and knotted shoulder blades.

"See?" Chris said while slowly pushing her own weight down on me through the shoulders, "It isn't just bones, organs and blood that needs healing. It is the stuff of the very soul."

Now that takes guts, trying to lecture Susan about thing like souls.

The wyvern remained oblivious to Susan eyes which blinked a number of times in disbelief. Indeed. As I thought: Even Susan had a hard time comprehending how Chris could have gotten the gall to try educating her about such things. Meanwhile, Chris wings draped over my chest while her talons rubbed up against the taut muscles in my shoulder... I expected worse with those points seemingly ready to sink into my flesh with one wrong move. The hard dragon-like dermis of her claws was actually pretty warm and not the cold boney sensation I would have expected. I slowly felt the muscles in my shoulders.

"Stop," Susan commanded. "You're going to hurt him."

"Nonsense!" Chris' voice bellowed definitely from the depths of her diaphragm. "I am quite confident, thank you very much."

She raised one talon from my shoulder and pointed daintily into her chest.

"Flying is a taxing activity. One's flight muscles must always be in prime condition. Instant and reliable physical condition is a must. There is no predicting evil, but a sore and tried body, untrained and unprepared, are predictable to those that are not prepared."

Chris let me go from her titan grip for a moment so that she could fold back her arms to knead her own shoulder and intercostal. I stole a glance and it looked far more sexual than I think she intended; what with running her talons from her shoulders, down her to her collar bones, around the curves of her huge breasts and to her sides ending at her hips.

"And you do not mind at all, do you, master?" came Chris, drifting into my ear.

A soft pillow-like feeling of soft skin, fat and muscle dropped down on my left shoulder. Chris leaned in with all her weight and I

could feel her hot breath tickle my ear. Her under-cleavage molded to the contours of my bare exposed shoulders, but when she stood back up straight those jugs of hers bounced back right into place.

"Yes, surely that is all in the name of flight," Susan said, snidely, her eyes fixed to the wyvern's chest.

"Hmm?" Chris hummed, her talons rolling off my shoulder and the tips gently scrapping down my chest.

I'm not prepared. Chris leaned forward and her weight pressed against my back and head. Her wings wrapped around me like a blanket... And her chest pressed up against the back of my head. No, it would be more appropriate to say my head sunk in. Sinking in-between her cleavage, two breasts whose sizes were comparable to my own head. My brain felt the warm embrace which began to melt it and made thinking harder. She stood about a whole head taller than I did, and I wasn't a short man, and so that made her already large breasts for her size even more massive compared to the ordinary sized world. Every experience I had with them never prepared me for the next. They always overwhelmed me.

One of Chris' claws traced its way back up my chest and tickled me under the chin like someone would scratch a cat. That's about when I caught on that Chris isn't playing around, or simply playing dumb. The pointed end then hooked around the curve of my jaws and gently pulled my face over to look back at hers. A flush of red had spread across her cheeks and an awkward pursed smile lay beneath a pair of eyes which seemed committed, yet still wholly embarrassed. Chris had strayed out of her comfort zone, but that didn't stop her when she reached for her top and pulled it back. Slowly, painfully slow, her under-cleavage drew back and revealed the white skin of her breasts. I wasn't sure if she planned it, but the suspender straps smushed in and rolled over her nipples and teased me by barely hiding out of sight; like a slingshot bikini.

A simple flex later, her breasts pulled apart enough that the suspenders rolled freely away from her giant mounds. Exposed to the elements were her pink nipples. They were not at all stressed and stretched out by the growth and sheer size of the boobs they crowned. With blood engorged eraser tip nubs and fleshy pink areola, neither did they show any sign of sagging. Chris' tits were in full defiance of gravity, her breasts never concave, instead healthily curving up, her nipples slightly pointing up toward the sky.

Chris resumed her massage, but this time with her bare breasts pushing against the back of my head. I could not longer see them, but that only caused my sense of touch to fill in the blank of missing stimuli. My eyes focused on Susan, whose expression had turned one of mortification. This would be about the time she began shouting and

ordering Chris to stop, but the whole scene made her shrink instead. I thought at first that her dropping down to her knees would be a sign that the anubis lost her strength to fight. But it wasn't a sign of surrender. Her will had not been broken. It did not concern her that body wouldn't guarantee her an easy victory on this battlefield.

So she suddenly grabbed my leg with her paws.

"Y-you're much too narrow minded!" she stuttered while attempting to sound bigger and in control.

My body had begun to feel more like melting butter. It offered no resistance when she yanked the boots off my feet. She wasted no time with the socks either. My feet felt encased in a pair of fuzzy slippers. A pair of soft paw pads in her hands squeezed down on my sweaty and tired feet and began rolling the tense muscles and tendons.

Paws kneading the soles of my feet in one direction, boney warm claws rubbing my shoulders and a pair of massive breasts cushioning my head from behind. I melted like butter. A gnarled and rotten feeling of my every muscle, exhausted from travel and battle, seeped out of me and into the ground to be washed away.

Shoshanah's competitive edge had kicked in and she brought it to the next level by removing the black Arabic of her top. Her chest was no slouch itself, the dark tan skin and small pink-orangish nipples of hers melded into an exotic sight to behold. Their size could not compare to Chris' (where I'm not sure where to begin measuring), but they were still filling out a DD cup. But not to be outdone, Susan slipped one of my feet between the farm cleavage of her breasts and up against her chest.

Chris noticed my sights locked on the deep tanned beauty in front of me and slithered out from behind me with a jealous spark glistening in her eyes. The massive mounds demanded my attention. Their gravitational field, by the very laws of nature, forced my gaze to fall into them.

"Hey~" She greeted coquettishly, the deep masculine inflection replaced by her natural womanly and higher pitched voice.

She seized my right hand in her talons and brought it up toward her left breasts. There were more breast to these boobs than I could ever hope to hold in just one hand. My fingers sunk into the soft and fatty flesh. It danced and jiggled at the tips of my fingers whenever I desired. The beat of her heart, strong and fast, I could feel through her gigantic knockers. A light tinge of burning sulfur rode with each breath of her that washed over my face. With the vapor and oxygen in her every breath, the smell reminded me of a bubbling hot spring. A bit of smoke followed with each heave of her chest; a fire burning inside her.

Susan would not be denied or cut off at the pass, so she

crawled back up from my feet and pressed in opposite to Chris. She butted her way in and both their right breasts collided with one another. It was like putting a V10 and V16 engine next to one another. Yet Susan wasn't about to let a few extra cylinders let Chris tear down the track without her. Chris' bust had the size advantage, and the height advantage, so they dropped down on top of Susan's which were pushed downward. The anubis conviction, the strength of her back and willpower did not cause her to back away or be intimidated.

"Pharaoh, please, to your heart's desire—"

The way they were both talking had me on edge. Both girls had left their better senses and were getting more daring and even more so intense. Susan grabbed hold of my left hand and pressed it sunk it into her own right breast. Nowhere near as much flesh hung from her chest to sink into. I could, however, hear her heartbeat more strongly.

"Hey!" Chris protested.

She let go of my hand, but my hand had a mind of its own and wasn't ready to go anywhere yet. It continued to juggle and squeeze everything it could get between its fingers with its grasp. There had been a competition before, but when Chris put her weight and size into it, Susan could only cling to the edge. Her brown skinned breasts were nearly fully swallowed up by the size of the wyvern's snow white mountains.

"Grrr," Susan growled like a dog in return and moved in closer, pushing both their breasts aside and together.

They interlocked, Chris glared downward intimidatingly whilst Susan definitely leered upward. Whatever I had to say on the matter was no longer relevant. I'm pretty sure they wouldn't notice anything I have to say... If I could manage to say it.

Susan's claws and Chris' talons sought to draw at the same time and so they both shot toward my belt loop with lightning speed. I had been liberated from my pants in the blink of an eye. Although it would be Susan's paw over the bulge in my underwear. Chris' couldn't due to her steel rending talons being no match to the furry and soft padded hands of Susan. Their scrum pushed them closer together, and closer yet to me. I got caught in the middle when they stood up and clashed. Susan came pressing in from my left and Chris came in from the right. A pair of tanned tits wrapped around my neck and jaw while a larger pair of fair skinned fun-bags pinched the rest of my head in their cleavage. Both their weights drove me further into my seat and I could neither budge forward, backward, or side to side. My mouth was quickly shut with the collective flesh of both bound my jaw and covered my lips. The weak moans and flailing of my arms did nothing to break their deadlock. Their competition, conveyed through the few glances I would steal of fierce competitive stare down, meant my

protests would go unnoticed.

All my attempts to divide the Red Sea of breasts came to no avail. Every passing moment sapped me of strength. The lack of oxygen to my brain made it harder and harder to resist the siren's smell of sweat and pheromones that oozed from the pores of their boobs. Everything I could hear, was growls, heart beats and the slapping of skin on skin. Everything I could see was darkness from my eyes being covered by nothing but breasts. Everything I could taste and feel were nothing but great mighty knockers.

Chris pulled away first, but not to give in. She merely moved on and found another avenue of attack. She pushed her entire bulk on me directly, resting on my thighs, and forced my hands were forced toward her tits. And so, in the palms of my hands, between my fingers, where Chris' nipples while the white fatty flesh danced in my palms. The anubis looked upon the face of the wyvern which curled in delight. Her tits were squishing on my face, but she envied the busy hands working on her rival's.

From below, Susan pulled away, but not in defeat, to free my dick from their cage and guided it with her paws between her breasts. Wrapping her paws around my waist to secure us both, she rubbed her chest to and fro and my shaft rubbed along the gladiolus of her chest, squished between the flesh of her tanned tits. Her black silky forelocks hung down and tickled the tip of my cock, the anubis' candle flame canine ears pressed forward against the top her head while her bushy black tail wagged excitedly behind her.

Chris continued to press the weight of her chest into me and unable to resist any longer I slipped her left nipple into my mouth and sucked greedily.

“Ahhhn,” She moaned. “Master, no matter how much you— they wont— “

I didn't care, I continued anyways.

“...Not yet they wont— Ahhhh~“

She was cut half halfway through when I bit down on the red flushed nipple and rolled it between my first four teeth between my canines. A poor little shrub, young ambitious and growing tree behind us got uprooted and blown clear from the soil. Chris came a little, so her body spazzed out on its own, causing her long dragon's tail to swipe back and forth, obliterating it. Anyone else caught in that would have been destroyed.

Susan reached down with her head and licked the tip of my lower spear with her tongue before kissing the whole crown. An accomplishment I could be proud of myself for, of course, but even though my whole body sat, tired, beyond belief. My nethers grew excited and hard. Susan's lips took in the whole glans while her

breasts pinched the shaft in her soft flesh. The feeling was divine.

Chris could not let her own climax go unrewarded. I had been well on my way with Susan, but the wyvern pushed the anubis aside. She knelt down further, with her ass and tail sticking far out behind her, and imprisoned my whole member between her breasts. It disappeared completely in there. Every crevice, nook and cranny felt the sweaty slick walls of her cleavage. The wyvern collected her breasts between her arms, crushing my dick between each, and then shook her mighty bust up and down.

Now it was Shoshanah's turn, and her face had flushed completely red. The sharp glint to her intelligent eyes had dulled and her bestial instincts had taken over. Her nostrils flared as she quickly sniffed the air just like a dog; the sweat and pheromones which radiated off me and overheated her brain. Her face had been on a collision course with my own and our mouths collided. Had her panting tongue not been stuck our first, our teeth may have cracked after crashing together. Instead, my tongue and hers met, slid past one another and then coiled together. A sweet smell of saliva, the rush of her own pheromones from the silky smooth and fleshly shampoo scented raven hair of hers tickling my nose.

I braced myself with one hand which reached around and grabbed a handful of Susan's behind, the other desperately held onto one of Chris' horns. From the corner of my eye, which I could only pry away from Susan's face for a moment, Chris' mouth opened and a stream of natural lubricant drooled down and between her breasts where it quickly coated my dick. My cock has been rubbed raw and sensitive already, so the hot spicy saliva, full of flammable chemicals, felt like barely diluted tobacco sauce plashed on my swollen red erection. My stomach and hips drew back in response, not because of a scathing heat, but because the sense of touch, mixed along with the electric jolt of my nerves being stimulated by heat and a teasing amount of pain. A mouthful of mouth watering curry, the flavor of which made the mouth burning oils only add to the experience in positive way.

Shoshanah finally pulled back for air. The two of us had nearly suffocated one another. A silky strand of saliva bridged between us, and broke when she slid back down my chest and toward where Chris was hard at work. She edged her way in and took up a spot to my left while Chris held the right. Their nipples docked together, their breasts collapsed back into their chests and the rest spilled out the sides while my penis wedged in the middle of it all. Their sweaty mounds lifted up and down, mushing into one another, grinding back and forth all over my cock. A mix of brown and white skin made a ying-yang balance around my member and spun erotically around. They glared at one

another with a rivalrous spirit, but looked up at me with seductive smiles. Daring me to look back solely at one and proclaim her the victor.

I cast my head backward instead.

My groaning became unsightly as my tired muscles, quivering in the legs and hips, struggled to met the demand being placed on them. My body simply could not keep up with its own libido; despite it having seized control of my thoughts. It pushed it beyond the limits and I felt a pressure build from my balls to the crown of my cock. It's slow, almost painfully slow, but when it reached its end it felt so very good. My spunk had so much time to gather, that when it squeezed out at last, it fired off like a cannon. My dick had been buried beneath their breasts, but that couldn't stop the volcanic eruption of white that spewed up into the air.

Molten hot white spunk rained down on the brown and white breasts and surprised faces of each girl. It was thick, viscous and stayed in place wherever it landed. Not just half a dozen times, not even two dozen times, my hips shook and my balls emptied out another ejaculation a pool of white bubbled out from between the crevice of their two breasts. They separated from one another, their breasts stained a whitish-yellow.

I didn't have time to admire my handiwork, or the happiness it brought to both their faces. My body would have to pay the price of overexerting itself right after one of Rose's training regimens. I collapsed backward off the stump and slammed my back into the dirt. Chris and Susan chimed out in worry, but I couldn't offer them a platitude as my eyes closed shut and I fell fast asleep.

No doubt with stupid grin plastered on my face.